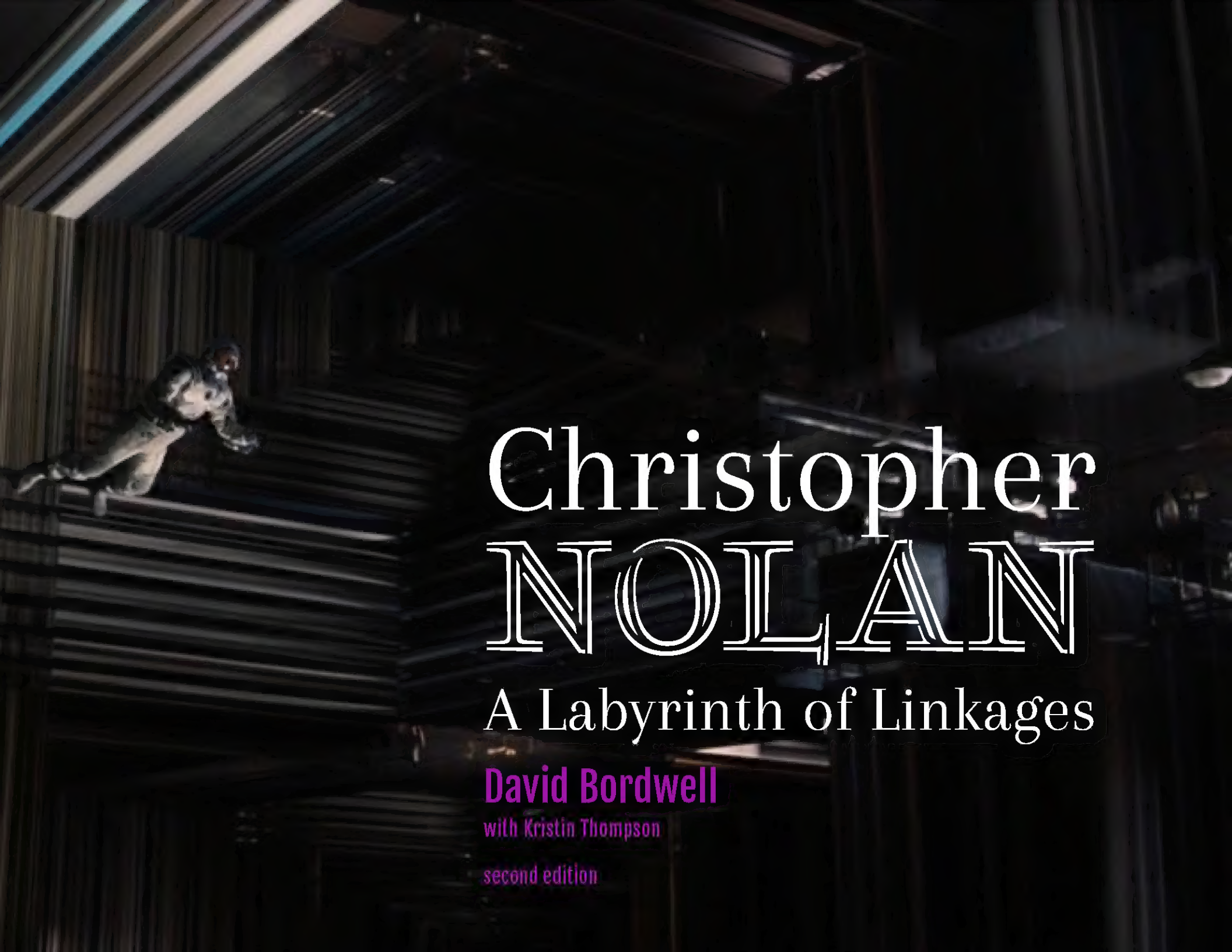

Christopher NOLAN

A Labyrinth of Linkages

David Bordwell
with Kristin Thompson

second edition

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Madison, Wisconsin: Irvington Way Institute Press, 2019

ISBN 978-0-9832440-5-9

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Every idea expressed by itself in words loses its meaning, becomes terribly debased when it is taken alone, out of the linkage in which it is found. This linkage is based not on an idea, I think, but on something else, and to express the essence of that linkage directly by words is impossible, but it is possible indirectly, with words describing images, actions, situations.... We need people who would show the senselessness of the search for separate thoughts in a work of art and who would constantly guide the reader in the endless labyrinth of linkages that makes up the stuff of art, and bring him to the laws that serve as the basis for those linkages.

Leo Tolstoy, 1876

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Authors' note

Portions of this book began on our blog "Observations on Film Art" (davidbordwell.net/blog). All those entries have been revised from that source, as well as from the version that appeared as the first edition of this book.

Most of this edition was written by David Bordwell, who is the "I" referred to in the text. The following portions were originally written by Kristin Thompson: most of the "Exposition rules" section of Chapter 4, most of the "Field-stripping the war movie" section of Chapter 6, and the Appendix, "Based on Uncle Scrooge? That's rich!"

A word about frame enlargements. *The Dark Knight, Inception, The Dark Knight Rises,* and *Interstellar* mix scenes shot on 35mm and 65mm film, yielding images in both the 2.40:1 aspect ratio (anamorphic) and the 1.43:1 format (the Imax standard). *Dunkirk,* shot wholly on 65mm film, created images in four aspect ratios: 1.43:1 and 1.90 for Imax, 2.20:1 for 70mm film projection, and 2.39:1 for standard digital projection.

The illustrations in our analyses are drawn from DVD and Blu-ray editions of Nolan's films. Because of the varying aspect ratios, some disc releases don't have consistent proportions. The Blu-ray editions of *Inception* and *Interstellar* offer the film in 2.39:1 throughout. But the Blu-ray editions of *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises* alternate between passages at 2.40:1 and passages displaying a ratio of about 1.78:1. The Blu-ray release of *Dunkirk* alternates between shots at 2.20:1 and shots at about 1.78. I can't confirm that any theatrical showing of these films ever employed the 1.78:1 ratio. ∞

Introduction

How to Innovate

> You want to go see a film that surprises you in some way. Not for the sake of it, but because the people making the film are really trying to do something that they haven't seen a thousand times before themselves.... I give a film a lot of credit for trying to do something fresh—even if it doesn't work. You appreciate the effort to a degree.
>
> *Christopher Nolan*

Paul Thomas Anderson, the Wachowskis, David Fincher, Darren Aronofsky, and other American directors who made breakthrough films at the end of the 1990s have managed to win either popular or critical success, and sometimes both. None, though, has had as meteoric a career as Christopher Nolan.

As of fall 2018, his films have earned over $4.7 billion at the global box office, and at least as much from cable television, DVD, and other ancillary platforms. On IMDB's list of the top 250 movies, as populist a measure as we can find, *The Dark Knight* (2008) currently ranks number 4 with nearly two million votes, while *Inception* (2010), at number 14, earned over 1.7 million. Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, and Peter Jackson each have three films in the poll's top 50. Nolan is the only director to have five.

Remarkably, many critics have lined up as well, embracing both Nolan's blockbusters and his more offbeat productions, like *Memento* (2000) and *The Prestige* (2006). From *Following* (1998) onward, his films have won between 76% and 94% "fresh" ratings on the aggregating website Rottentomatoes.com. Even *Insomnia* (2002), probably his least-discussed film, earned 92% "fresh." Nolan is now routinely considered one of the most accomplished living filmmakers.

Yet some critics fiercely dislike his work. They regard it as intellectually shallow, dramatically clumsy, and technically inept. People who shrug off patchy plots and continuity errors in ordinary productions have dwelt on them in Nolan's movies. The vehemence of the attack is probably in part a response to his elevated reputation. Having been raised so high, he has farther to fall.

I admire some of Nolan's films, for reasons I hope to make clear. I have some reservations about them too. Yet I think that all parties will agree that Nolan seeks to be an innovative filmmaker. Some will argue that his innovations are feeble, but that's beside my point here. His career offers us an occasion to think through some issues about creativity and originality in popular cinema.

Taking this stance suggests that it can be useful to look at the artistic history of films apart from our urge to rate goodness and badness. We can consider *The Birth of a Nation* a pernicious film while still examining its ambitious formal organization, its powerful use of technique, and its influence on other filmmakers. *The Jazz Singer* is nobody's idea of the greatest film ever made, but it played an important role in establishing synchronized-sound movies as a new mode of cinema, and so its use of sound and its subsequent place in film history are worth examining. Some judgments about Nolan's films are threaded through what Kristin and I write in the pages that follow, but those are largely secondary. We concentrate more on analysis than evaluation.

Put it another way. One critic might ask, "What makes Nolan an excellent filmmaker?" Another might ask, "What makes him a bad filmmaker?" We're asking another question: What, on present

evidence, have his films accomplished in the artistic history of American studio cinema? Our answer starts from the assumption that his achievement revolves around innovations.

Four dimensions, at least

Many excellent films aren't very innovative, and some innovative films aren't particularly worthwhile. Innovation isn't necessarily a good thing. But sometimes it can be. Even when one filmmaker's innovation fails, it can provoke others to try something new. And whether an innovative work succeeds or falls short, it can often teach us something worthwhile about how films work, and work on us.

First, though, let's ask: *How* can a filmmaker innovate? I see four primary ways.

You can innovate by tackling new subject matter. This is a common strategy of documentary cinema, which often shows us a slice of our world we haven't seen or even known about before, from *Vernon, Florida* to *Darwin's Nightmare*.

You can also innovate by developing new themes. The 1950s "liberal Westerns" substituted a brotherhood-of-man theme for the Manifest-Destiny theme that had driven earlier Western movies. The subject matter, the conquest of the West by white settlers and a national government, was given a different thematic coloring (which of course varied from film to film). Science fiction films were once dominated by conceptions of future technology as sleek and efficient, but after *Alien*, we saw that the future might be just as dilapidated as the present.

Apart from subject or theme, you can innovate by trying out new formal strategies. This option is evident in fictional narrative cinema, where plot structure or narration can be treated in unusual ways. You can, for instance, experiment with story chronology, as do some flashback films in Hollywood in the 1940s. Or you might present an unidentified narrator whose identity is revealed at the end, as in *Mad Max II: The Road Warrior*. Documentaries have experimented with form as well, as *The Thin Blue Line* and *Man with a Movie Camera* have. Stan Brakhage's creation of "lyrical cinema" would be an example of formal innovation in avant-garde filmmaking.

Finally, you can innovate at the level of style—the patterning of film technique, the audiovisual texture of the movie. A clear example would be Godard's jump cuts in *À Bout de souffle*, but new techniques of shooting, staging, framing, lighting, color design, and sound work would also count. In *Cloverfield* and *Chronicle*, the first-person camera technique is applied, in different ways, to science-fiction tales. Often technological changes trigger stylistic innovation, as with the Dolby ATMOS system now encouraging filmmakers to create sound effects that seem to be occurring above our heads.

There are other means of innovation in the filmmaking community—for instance, stunt casting, or new marketing strategies—but these four offer a clear point of departure. How then might we capture Nolan's cinematic innovations?

I'm going to assume that his strengths aren't in the choice of subjects, since genre considerations have kept him to superheroics, science fiction, and psychological crime and mystery. I think his chief areas of innovation lie in theme and form.

The thematic dimension has attracted a lot of attention. There's the issue of uncertain identity, which becomes explicit in *Memento* and the Batman films. The lost-woman motif, from Leonard's wife in *Memento* to Mal in *Inception*, gives Nolan's films the recurring romantic theme of the man doomed to solitude and unhappiness, always grieving. If this almost obsessive circling around personal identity and the loss of wife or lover carries emotional conviction, it owes a good deal to the performances of Guy Pearce, Hugh Jackman, Christian Bale, and Leonardo DiCaprio, who put some flesh on Nolan's somewhat schematic situations.

You can argue that these psychological themes aren't especially original, especially in mystery-based plots, but some claim that the Batman films offer something fresher. The *Dark Knight* trilogy has attracted attention for its willingness to suggest real-world resonance in comic-book material. Umberto Eco once complained that Superman, who has the power to redirect rivers, prevent asteroid collisions, and expose political corruption, devotes too much of his time to nabbing bank robbers. Nolan and his colleagues have sought to answer Eco's charge by imbuing the usual string of heists, fights, chases, explosions, kidnappings, ticking bombs, and hostage bargaining with sociopolitical gravitas. *The Dark Knight* invokes ideas about terrorism, torture, surveillance, and the need to keep the public in the dark about its he-

roes. Something similar has happened with *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), leaving commentators to puzzle out what it's saying about financial manipulation, class inequities, and the 99 percent/1 percent debate.

Nolan and his collaborators are doubtless doing something ambitious in giving the superhero genre a new weightiness. In this, I think, they satisfy journalists who, needing an angle on this week's release, look for a film to reflect the current zeitgeist. Yet the filmmakers are also executing a familiar maneuver by making their project systematically ambiguous.

I say this because the filmmakers use reflection of the zeitgeist chiefly as a talking point. I think they realize, perhaps only tacitly, that the films they make don't capture the spirit of the time, assuming such a thing exists, but simply opportunistically stitch together whatever lies to hand. Hollywood movies are strategically ambiguous about political and social matters. This maneuver helpfully disarms criticisms from interest groups ("Look at the positive points we put in") and gives the film an air of moral seriousness ("See, things aren't simple; there are gray areas").

I'm not saying that films can't carry an intentional message. Bryan Singer and Ian McKellen claim the *X-Men* series criticizes prejudice against gays and minorities. Nor am I saying that an ambivalent film comes from its makers delicately implanting counterbalancing clues. Sometimes filmmakers probably do that. More often, I think, they pluck out bits of cultural flotsam opportunistically, stirring it all together and offering it up to see if we like the taste. It's in filmmakers' interests to push a lot of our buttons without worrying whether what comes out is a coherent intellectual position.

In fact, Nolan confirms strategic ambiguity as his *modus operandi*. He says of the finale of the *Dark Knight* trilogy:

> We throw a lot of things against the wall to see if it sticks. We put a lot of interesting questions in the air, but that's simply a backdrop for the story.... We're going to get wildly different interpretations of what the film is supporting and not supporting, but it's not doing any of those things. It's just telling a story.

To be clear, I don't think the just-telling-a-story alibi is bulletproof. The mix of cultural materials on display in a movie can carry plenty of ideological implications. My point is only that we ought not to expect popular movies, or indeed many movies, to offer conceptions of politics or society that reflect the temper of the times in any coherent way. Thematic murkiness and confusion are the norm, and the movie's inconsistencies may reflect nothing more than the makers' promiscuous scavenging.

Can we then find some originality in Nolan's use of film style and narrative form? In the next chapter I consider Nolan's stylistic efforts, and I'll argue that by and large this isn't the place to look for novelty. It's worth considering, though, because his audiovisual technique has been the source of much of the skepticism and even disdain that critics have displayed. Those reactions, I think, aren't wholly deserved.

More substantially, I will claim that Nolan has a "formal project," an urge to explore a specific set of storytelling techniques. Like Resnais, late Godard, and Hong Sangsoo (a strange crew, I admit), Nolan zeroes in, from film to film, on a few narrative devices, finding new possibilities in what most directors handle routinely. He seems to me a very thoughtful, almost theoretical director in his fascination with turning certain conventions of plot structure and narration this way and that, to reveal their unexpected possibilities. Pledged to a degree of novelty that can still engage mass audiences, he becomes a good example of how mainstream cinema today can try new things. Examining the innovations that his formal project yields is the main task of this little book. ∞

Chapter One

Style without Style?

Nolan's command of basic film craft has been called into question. It's common to deplore the aggressive, spatially confusing action sequences in modern movies, and Nolan has come in for his share of whacks on this score. But he's also been called a fumbler in his dialogue scenes and fundamental exposition.

I don't think that any popular filmmaker of recent years has received the sort of harsh, meticulous dissection that several sharp-eyed critics have applied to Nolan's work. In a video essay, Jim Emerson argues, shot by shot, that a sequence in *The Dark Knight* exemplifies one of the film's "most painfully obvious shortcomings. Its visual grammar is a mess, and sometimes that results in scenes that are just incoherent." A. D. Jameson condemns Nolan as a "depressingly artless filmmaker," so reliant on dialogue that the result is "an illustrated script." Jameson finds the opening of *Inception* characteristically clumsy: Its thirteen shots, he claims, could easily be compressed to seven, or even four, with considerable advantages in audience engagement. Few of today's directors could withstand this invasive surgery, but it's still startling to find the revered Nolan on the operating table.

How fair are these judgments? I think that Emerson, Jameson, and others are right to claim that Nolan's work sometimes lacks finesse and rigor in its audiovisual texture. Along the dimensions of innovation I charted in the Introduction, film style won't by and large be Nolan's claim to fame. But I believe that some of his scenes and whole films do work well cinematically. More basically, I'll try to show that we can learn things about cinema from a filmmaker even when his or her stylistic choices are questionable. The case is parallel to those writers who write uninspired sentences and still provide intriguing plots. In later chapters I'll suggest ways in which storytelling ingenuity can override stylistic shortcomings.

Sleepless in Nightmute

Those who consider Nolan a weak stylist can find evidence in *Insomnia* (2002), his first studio film. Dormer, a Los Angeles detective, and his partner Hap come to an Alaskan town to investigate the murder of a teenage girl. While chasing a suspect in the fog, Dormer accidentally shoots Hap and then lies about it, trying to pin his death on the suspect. But the suspect, a famous author who is indeed guilty, knows what really happened in the chase. He pressures Dormer to cover for both of them by framing the girl's boyfriend. Meanwhile, Dormer is undergoing scrutiny by Ellie, a young officer who idolizes him but who must investigate Hap's death. And through it all, Dormer becomes bleary and disoriented because the twenty-four-hour daylight won't let him sleep. (His name seems a screenwriter's conceit, invoking *dormir*, to sleep.)

Nolan said at the time that what interested him in the script—already bought by Warners and offered to him after *Memento*—was the prospect of character subjectivity.

> A big part of my interest in filmmaking is an interest in showing the audience a story through a character's point of view. It's interesting to try and do that and maintain a relatively natural look.

He wanted, as he says on the DVD commentary, to keep the audience in Dormer's head. Having already done that to an extent in *Memento*, he saw

subjectivity as a logical way of presenting Dormer's slow crackup.

How to go subjective? Nolan chose to break up scenes with fragmentary flashes of the crime and of such clues as a necklace and painted toenails. Early in the film, Dormer is studying Kay Connell's corpse, and we ge flashes of the murder and its grisly aftermath, the killer sprucing up the corpse (Figs. 1.1 to 1.3).

At first it seems that Dormer intuits what happened by noticing clues on Kay's body. But the film's credits have started with similar glimpses of the killing, as if from the killer's point of view. So there's an ambiguity about whether the interpolated images we see now are Dormer's imaginative reconstruction, or reminders of the killer's vision. The uncertainty establishes that uneasy link of cop and crook that is a staple of the crime film.

Similarly, abrupt cutting is used to introduce a cluster of images that gets clarified in the course of the film. At the film's start, we see blood seeping through threads, and then shots of hands carefully depositing blood on a fabric. Then we see shots of Dormer, awaking jerkily while flying in to the crime scene. Are these enigmatic images more extracts from the crime, or are they something else? We'll learn in the course of the film that these are flashbacks to Dormer's framing of another suspect back in Los Angeles. Once again, these images prove to be more or less subjective, and they echo the killer's patient tidying up of his victim.

The rapid cutting in these passages is typical of Nolan's style generally. *Insomnia* has over 3400 shots in its 111 minutes, making the average shot just under two seconds long. Rapid editing like this can suit bursts of mental imagery, but it's hard to sustain in meat-and-potatoes dialogue scenes. Yet Nolan tries.

The scene in which Dormer and Hap arrive at the Nightmute police station illustrates the busy tempo that can come along with a style based in "intensified continuity." In a seventy-second scene, there are 39 shots, so the average is about 1.8 seconds—a pace typical of the film and of the intensified approach generally (Figs. 1.4 to 1.8). video clip

Apart from one exterior long-shot of the police station and four inserts of hands, the char-

Figs. 1.1 to 1.3

Fig. 1.4

acters' interplay is captured almost entirely in singles. (A "single" is a shot showing only one actor, usually a medium- or close shot.) Out of the 34 shots of actors' faces and upper bodies, 24 are singles. Most of these serve to pick up individual lines of dialogue or characters' reactions to other lines. The singles are shot with telephoto lenses, a choice exemplifying what I called the tendency toward "bipolar" lens lengths in intensified continuity—that is, either very long lenses or fairly wide-angle ones.

Figs. 1.5 to 1.8

Fast cutting like this need not break up traditional spatial orientation. In this scene, there are a couple of bumps in the eyeline-matching, but basically continuity principles are respected. As Nolan explains on the DVD commentary, he tried to anchor the axis of action, or 180-degree line, around Dormer/Pacino, so the eyelines were consistent with his position, and that's usually the case here.

The scene's development and the actors' line readings are emphasized by the cutting; the lighting and framing remain almost unvarying (though there's also an occasional slight push-in during an establishing framing). These aren't innovative choices, having become conventional since the 1970s.

Despite its more or less cogent continuity, the scene is choppy, uneconomical, and fairly perfunctory in its stylistic handling. Nolan makes no effort to move the actors around the set in a way that would underscore the dramatic development. Because of the rapid editing, characters' lines and gestures are cut off or unprepared for. There is no effort to design each shot, à la Hitchcock, to fit the actor's reaction or line delivery. Most shots are excerpted from full takes, all from the same setup. The most obvious example is the setup that pans to show Dormer as he comes in, stops, and reacts to the conversation (Figs. 1.9 to 1.12). Thirteen shots are taken from that setup (not necessarily the same full production take, of course, as the last frame here shows).

Figs. 1.8 to 1.12

Nolan's other films often display the same tendency toward loose, roughly centered framings. His avoidance of tight shot design may be encouraged further when he shoots in both the 1.43 IMAX ratio and the 2.40 anamorphic one. It's hard to create complex compositions respecting both ratios at the same time.

Somebody is sure to reply that the nervous editing is aiming to express Dormer's anxiety about the investigation into his career. But that would be too broad an explanation. On the same grounds, every awkwardly edited film could be said to be expressing dramatic tensions within or among the characters. Moreover, even when Dormer isn't present, the same choppy cutting is on display. Consider the twenty-three shots showing Ellie greeting Dormer and Hap as they get off the plane.

video clip

Again, we have lengthier production takes broken up into brief phases of action. It takes five shots to get Dormer out of the plane, with an almost arbitrary succession of shot scales. When Ellie leaves her vehicle to go out on the pier, the action is presented in nine shots. Figs. 1.13 to 1.21.

We can imagine a simpler presentation. Perhaps after an establishing shot of the plane descending, we track with Ellie down along the dock, so we can see her smiling anticipation, then pan with her walking leftward into a framing that prepares for the plane hatch to open. Arguably, the need to show off production values, the vast natural landscape, the swooping plane descending, pressed Nolan to include some of the extra shots.

Figs. 1.13 to 1.15 | Figs. 1.16 to 1.18 | Figs. 1.19 to 1.21

They don't do much dramatically, and the strange cut back to an extreme long shot (Fig 1 19, perhaps to cover the change to a new angle on Ellie) may negate whatever affinity with her that the closer shots aim to build up

Swedish sleeplessness

In studying style, it's often useful to invoke comparisons. For instance, Steven Soderbergh's *Magic Mike* has a quiet, clean style that conveys each story point without fanfare. Soderbergh saves his singles for major moments and drops back for long running master shots when character interaction counts. For him a cut is just that, it trims fat. He doesn't resort to those short lived arcing and push in camera movements to which Nolan seems addicted. He doesn't waste time with filler shots of people going in and out of buildings, or aerial views of a cityscape. Soderbergh can provide an unfussy 70s ish telephoto long take of Mike and Brooke walking along a pier and settling down at a picnic table in front of a Go Kart track while her brother Adam materializes in the distance (Fig 1 22)

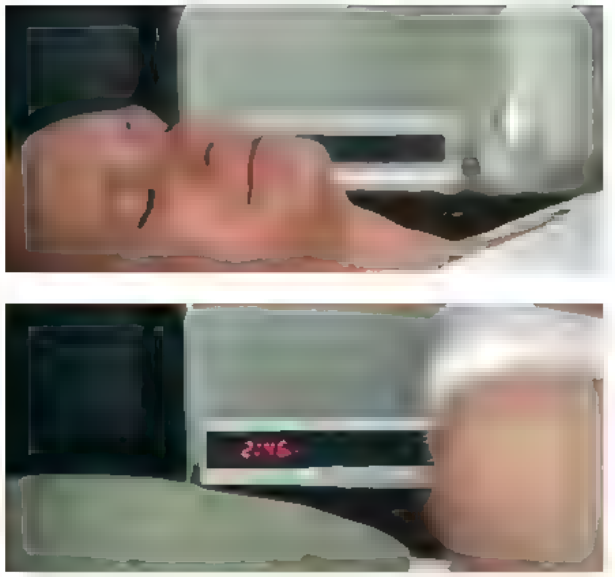
With *Contagion*, *Haywire*, *Magic Mike*, *Side Effects*, and *Logan Lucky*, Soderbergh has proven himself our master of the intelligent midrange picture. These movies give lessons in discreet, compact direction

For a still more pertinent contrast with Nolan, we can go back to *Insomnia*'s source, the 1997 Norwegian film of the same name written and directed by Erik Skjoldbjærg. Here a Swedish detective, vaguely under suspicion for an infraction of duty, comes to a town on the Arctic Circle for a murder investigation. The plot's premise is like that of the remake, but the stylistic working out is quite different. Consider two points of contrast

First, the cutting is less jagged. Skjoldbjærg's film comes in at ninety seven minutes, about fifteen minutes shorter than Nolan's, and its cutting rate is much slower, averaging 5 4 seconds per shot. That means that many passages are built out of sustained shots, particularly ones showing the detective Jonas Engström walking or sitting in a brooding, self contained silence. Also, this version finds ways to convey several bits of information concisely, in carefully designed shots. For example, as Engström is unable to sleep, we see his eyes open and he lifts his head. Rack focus to the clock behind him (Figs. 1 23 to 1 24). Nolan uses three shots to get across a comparable point (Figs. 1 25 to 1 27)

As for subjectivity, Skjoldbjærg is just as keen to pull us inside his detective's head as Nolan is. At times he uses the sort of flash cutting Nolan

Fig. 1.22



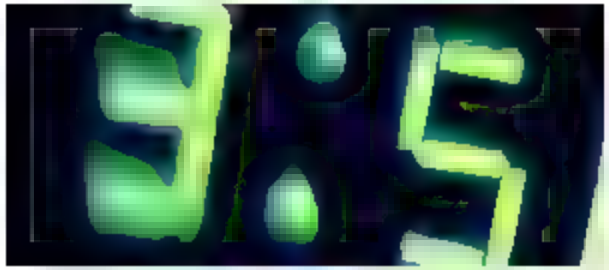
Figs. 1.23 to 1.24

employs, so we get fragmentary reminders of the fog-clouded shooting. But Skjoldbærg doesn't tease us with unattributed inserts such as Nolan's flashbacks to Dormer's framing of a suspect, and he never suggests, via images of the murder and its cleanup, that his detective can imagine the crime concretely. Instead, Skjoldbærg often evokes his character's unease through camera movements that upset our sense of his spatial location.

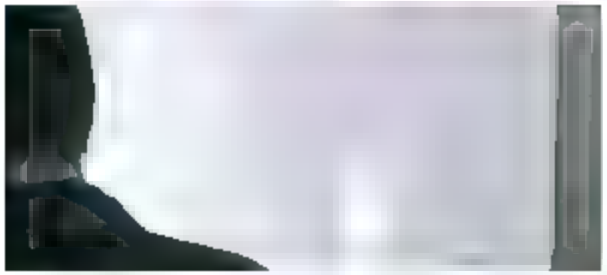
The camera shows Engstrom striding into a room, and then swivels rightward to show him in his original location, as if he's sneaked around behind our back. Figs. 1.28 to 1.32. Then Engstrom turns, and we hear a footstep. Cut to a shot showing that the sound is made by him walking in another room. Figs. 1.33 to 1.34. It was a sound bridge, not an offscreen noise.

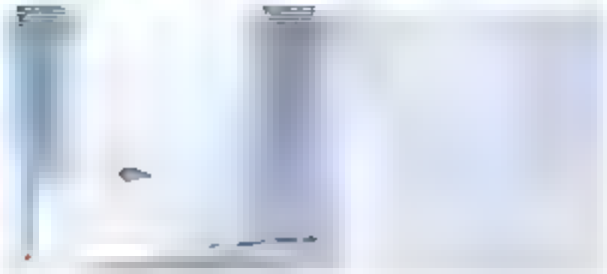
video clip

I'm not going to suggest that Skjoldbærg innovates more radically than Nolan does, though most viewers probably are more startled by these devices than by Nolan's. I think that the original *Insomnia*'s stylistic gamesmanship owes something to other precedents, going back to Dreyer's *Vampyr*. What I find more interesting is that No

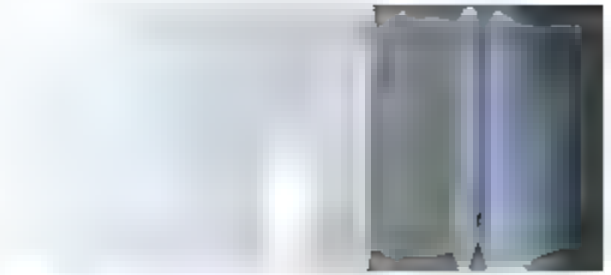


Figs. 1.25 to 1.27





Figs. 1.28 to 1.30



Figs. 1.31 to 1.34

lan had available the prior example of these strat egies from his Nordic source, and he still chose to go with the more conventional, cutting based options.

An editing driven, somewhat catch as catch can approach to staging and shooting is clearly Nolan's preference for many projects. He doesn't prepare shot lists, and he storyboards only the big action sequences. Nolan typically goes on loca tion or builds large practical sets, then maneuvers through them with handheld takes interrupted by locked down singles and over the shoulder shots. As his DP Wally Pfister remarks, "What I do is not complicated." Comparing their production method to documentary filming, he adds: "A lot of the spirit of it is: How fast can we shoot this?" The result, too often, is a loose visual texture enlivened by brusque editing.

How important is style?

Can you be a good writer without writing excep tionally well? I think so.

James Fenimore Cooper, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and other significant novelists had many virtues, but elegant prose was not among them. In popular fiction we treasure flawless wordsmiths like P. G. Wode house and Rex Stout and Patricia Highsmith, but we tolerate bland or clumsy style if a gripping plot and vivid characters keep us turning the pages. From Burroughs and Doyle to Stieg Larsson, Mi chael Crichton, and J. K. Rowling, we forgive a lot.

Similarly, Nolan's work deserves attention even though some of it lacks elegance and cohesion at the shot to shot level. His stylistic shortcomings, I'll argue in the chapters that follow, are offset by his innovative approach to overarching form. For now, we can note that he sometimes exercises more stylistic precision. When he mobilizes visual technique to sharpen and nuance his architectur al ambitions, we find a solid integration of texture and structure, fine grain and large pattern.

The most obvious example of stylistic coher ence is *Memento*. The film, in which large stretch es are presented in reverse story order, must be very controlled at the shot by shot level to guide us through its labyrinth. The jigsaw joins of the plot require that the head and tail of each re verse chronology segment be carefully shaped. They must fit smoothly together both forward and backward, even though they will always be interrupted by black and white scenes of for ward moving action.

Figs. 1.35 to 1.36

Within the scenes as well, Nolan displays a solid craftsmanship, with mostly tight shot con nections and an absence of stylistic bumps. He can even slow things down enough for a video clip fifty second two shot that develops both drama and humor. Leonard has just shown Teddy the man bound and gagged in his closet, and Teddy wonders how they can get him out. In a nice gag, Leonard produces a gun from below the frame line (we've seen him hide it in a drawer) and then reflects that it must belong to his prisoner (Figs. 1.35 to 1.36). The moment is capped when Leon ard adds, "I don't think they let someone like me carry a gun," as he darts out of the frame. This sort of use of off frame space to build and pay off au dience expectations seems rare in Nolan's scenes. But another example usually gets a laugh in *Incep tion*. There Eames teases Arthur's automatic rifle by hauling into the frame the mother of all guns after remarking, "You mustn't be afraid to dream a little bigger, darling" (Figs. 1.37 to 1.38).

Nolan also exploits stylistic contrasts to keep his plot on track. *Memento*'s more or less pres ent time scenes, both chronological and reversed, are given in fixed, straightforward shots. By con trast, we get rapid, impressionistic handheld work characterizing Leonard's flashbacks to his domes tic life and his wife's death (in color) and his flash backs to the life of Sammy Jankis (in black and white). Nolan shrewdly segregates his techniques according to time zone.

Figs. 1.37 to 1.38

Nuance and niceties

The Prestige displays even more precision. Faced with two protagonists and many flashbacks and replayed events, we could easily become lost. Here Nolan doesn't use black and white imagery to mark off a separate zone. He helps us keep all the time levels straight by using voice overs and repeated and varied setups that quietly orient us to recurrent spaces and circumstances. Here Nolan's preference for cutting together singles is subjected to a simple but crisp logic that relies on our memory to grasp the developing drama. His sound bridges and clusters of imagery create that "labyrinth of linkages" that Tolstoy considered central to narrative artistry.

Dueling magicians: The film's premise might be considered high concept. In turn of the century London, two young conjurers launch their careers with different attitudes toward their craft. Robert Angier favors audacious showmanship, while Alfred Borden is committed to finding a trick that will baffle the experts. Their rivalry is ignited when Alfred accidentally kills Angier's wife during a dangerous underwater stunt. Their struggle soon centers on each one's supreme trick: transporting himself from one point to another instantaneously. Alfred achieves this effect through a very simple illusion, while Robert has to resort to steampunk science.

One aspect of the plot creates a mystery around Alfred Borden. Nolan's task is to hide crucial information while hinting at it. He must invite us to sympathize with Alfred's adversary Robert (another widower by violence), and then shift our sympathies back to Alfred when we learn how Robert's thirst for revenge has unhinged him. To achieve the unreliable, oscillating narration of *The Prestige*, Nolan has polished his film's stylistic surface with considerable care.

Figs. 1.39 to 1.40

A good example is the film's opening sequence. As the voice of Cutter explains a magic trick's three acts, we see a climactic confrontation between the competitors. Hoping to discover Robert's secret, Alfred watches the Real Transported Man performance from the audience. As Cutter's narration mentions "a man," the camera picks out Alfred in the crowd. Cut to Robert onstage, a shift that establishes the two as our protagonists (Figs. 1.39 to 1.40).

The introduction of the bearded Alfred, which initiates the flashback, presents a medium shot framing him nearly in profile facing right. This framing will be repeated, but varied, when Alfred's voice over diary entry introduces both him and Robert as apprentices, working as audience shills for another magician: "We were two young men at the start of a great career—two young men devoted to an illusion, who never intended to hurt anyone."

This later shot parallels the introduction of Alfred in the first scene, but varies it. Again we see Alfred in the audience, but now without a beard. The camera tracks rightward to show Robert in another row (Figs. 1.41 to 1.42). In this sequence, our protagonists are connected by a camera movement rather than the cut employed in the opening. The two men's reactions—Robert grinning (his wife is onstage), Alfred more pensive—add to the characterizations that we will see played out later.

This simple camera motif gets varied further in the course of the film. The disastrous immersion illusion that drowns Robert's wife is initiated by another tracking shot of the two men in the audience, a variation of the earlier shot (Figs. 1.43 to 1.44). This new combination starts with Robert and ends on Alfred. At this point, not only are the two men linked, but they replace one another. You could say that this variant quietly affirms the film's overall dynamic of substitution (doubles, twins, clones).

Earlier, a contrasting way of showing the men in an audience is given us when they attend a performance of the wizard Chung Ling Soo. Cutter provides a dialogue hook, warning Robert that "the blokes at the ends of row three and four" can see him kissing his wife's leg. Cut to our protagonists, sitting at the end of a row and watching the Chinese magician (Figs. 1.45 to 1.46).

Now the men are sitting side by side and facing left rather than right. Just through camera placement and character position, we know we're in a different performance, one in which our apprentices play no undercover role. As they study the trick, Nolan gives us another characterizing shot. Robert is amazed, but Alfred grins: He's worked out Chung's secret (Fig. 1.47). What would have happened if Nolan had framed the men sitting apart and/or facing to the right? For an instant we might have thought we were back in the act they shill for.

Medium shot/long shot, looking rightward/looking leftward, men in different rows/men in the same row: simple but reiterated differences assure immediate comprehension. Just as the repeated framings of their own act clarify the situation, so do these little polarities. Call it redundancy, if you like, but it's also precision and economy.

With Julia's death, the men become enemies. But each will still slip, disguised, into the audience of the other's performances. From now on, the performer is always stationed on the right, the onlooker on the left. Nolan and company could have handled their rivalry in camera setups that exactly mimic the early ones. Instead, a new pattern of parallels comes into play, building on the

Figs. 1.41 to 1.42

Figs. 1.43 to 1.44

Figs. 1.45 to 1.47

earlier ones but different enough to heighten the symmetries

The new pattern is set up by restricting our range of knowledge. First, we are attached to Alfred when he performs his bullet catch in a bar room theatre. Robert, seeking vengeance for Julia's drowning, steps up to spoil the trick, but we don't know he's there until Alfred does, and then it's too late (Figs. 1.48 to 1.49).

Similarly, we're restricted to Robert's range of knowledge when he tries to execute his disappearing dove trick. Only when Alfred is about to trigger the collapsing cage killing the dove and wounding a lady from the audience does Robert realize that his adversary has struck back (Figs. 1.50 to 1.51). Another nicety. The two shots of each man in similar disguises, seen in 3/4 view, reset the stylistic parameters. But the image of the bearded Alfred is given extra punch through a tilt up from his missing fingers (Fig. 1.52) — the result of the parallel bullet catch scene before.

The whole pattern shifts yet again when Robert sneaks in to watch Alfred's Transported Man illusion. We get a shot of him (in a beard again) that fuses two of the cues from the earlier scenes. He's in the audience, as in the early sequences, but he's shown from an angle congruent with that of the earlier beard shots (Fig. 1.53). And perhaps we can take the shot of Robert at home, telling of his amazement at Alfred's illusion, as an echo of the initial prototype (Fig. 1.54). A magician stares intently rightward at a dazzling trick played out offscreen, but now in memory.

Robert returns from Colorado with the Tesla designed "Real Transported Man," and Alfred's visit to watch the stunt reworks the givens of this pattern yet again. Alfred is seated, minimally disguised, in the standard audience spot looking right, but he is not in profile and the camera position is much closer than before. The answering shot of Robert onstage recalls the gesture we saw at the film's outset and anticipates what we will see when that opening scene is replayed, with the wicked Alfred climbing onstage (Figs. 1.55 to 1.56).

At the close of the trick, yet one more variant emerges. Robert appears in the rear balcony and the crowd turns to watch him off left (Fig. 1.57).

Figs. 1.48 to 1.49

Figs. 1.50 to 1.52

Figs. 1.53 to 1.54

Figs. 155 to 156

Figs. 157 to 158

After a glance back, Alfred turns away, looking right again—the first time any character has flinched from watching a performance (Fig. 1.58). His puzzlement is mixed with anger: At last, a trick he can't see through. This is a less charitable response than we saw in Robert's stunned fireside recollection of Alfred's Transported Man.

The things held constant, such as camera placement and position in the locale, set off the differences in characters' disguises and reactions, while this shot carries faint echoes of our very first view of Alfred during Cutter's voice over monologue. That view, and its answering shot of Robert in the spotlight, will recur when Robert's pseudo death is replayed.

Nolan's audacious film is built out of more marked parallels than these, which we'll consider in Chapter 3. Here I wanted merely to highlight the solid, careful design of one small pattern. And this pattern is quite traditional. Many films weave varied repetitions like these into their shot by shot texture. Back in the 1930s, Eisenstein saw this possibility clearly. In the 1960s and 1970s, the critic Raymond Bellour called our attention to such patterns in films by Hitchcock, Hawks, and Minnelli.

I wouldn't go as far as Bellour does in seeing varied repetition at this level as *the* motor force of classical filmmaking, but it surely plays an important role. What he takes as a manifestation of pure textual difference I'm inclined to psychologize. These differences help the audience understand, usually without awareness, the ongoing narrative dynamic. They provide the extra payoff of creating tacit parallels between characters and situations.

Whatever perspective we take, text centered or response centered, studying such microforms is enlightening. It helps us to understand films as wholes, as dynamic constructions that shift their shapes across the time of their unfolding. Moreover, by examining things this closely, we can try to understand not only how this or that film works, but how this or that film relies on *principles* distinctive of a filmmaking tradition.

Nolan's stylistic choices here are tidily traditional in their efforts to create clarity and their quiet channeling of narrative information. And as in the old studio days, those choices answer to two pressures. They enhance narrative coherence and comprehension on the one hand, and they foster production efficiency on the other. It's cheaper and easier to repeat camera setups when you can. Artistic economy and financial economy can work together. Nolan proves himself more meticulous, on both fronts, than his critics sometimes acknowledge. ∞

Chapter Two

Storytelling as a Formal Project

If Nolan isn't especially original as a stylist, he's worth our attention on other fronts. He concentrates on exploring new possibilities of storytelling. In his films, style functions mostly to transmit the wrinkles and byways of increasingly intricate plots. For him, genre, subject, and theme often serve as the basis of extravagant narrative conceits.

Those efforts add up to what I called in the introduction a "formal project." He explores a fairly bounded set of creative options in different genres. It's rare for any filmmaker to find a fresh way of presenting a story. It's even rare to find a filmmaker displaying a steady, almost systematic development of his storytelling strategies. In Hollywood, no less.

Mechanics and motivation

Hollywood doesn't suffocate all originality. It encourages innovation to some degree. Novelty can attract attention, and perhaps audiences too. Yet the innovations must be blended with traditional storytelling maneuvers. These assure that the viewer doesn't get utterly lost in the course of the film. This is why it's useful for us to think about how adventurous films give us aids for comprehension.

To get a sense of Nolan's originality, it helps to consider motivation. By this I don't mean what actors sometimes mean. In a famous quip, Hitchcock said: "When an actor comes to me and wants to discuss his character, I say, 'It's in the script.' If he says, 'But what's my motivation?' I say, 'Your salary.'"

I'll be using the idea of motivation in a broader sense: the idea that any artwork needs more or less to justify certain elements or strategies it presents. You want your movie to have musical numbers. How to justify them in your story? Many early musicals simply make the characters show-business types, so we see them rehearsing and performing numbers for the audience. Other musicals toss that "realistic" motivation aside and let the characters sing and dance wholly for one another. But then those films are appealing to a sort of motivation familiar from opera, where characters simply burst into song and dance without realistic motivation. We accept this type of artifice too because that's just what this genre of film permits, the way that horror films include monsters that are unlikely to exist in the real world.

Second, you can motivate formal experiment through the movie's appeal to some widely-believed law of life, a common-sense realism. Uncanny coincidences in movies like *Serendipity* and *Sliding Doors* are justified by the notion that fate or spiritual harmony can bring soul mates together. *Six Degrees of Separation*'s plot exploits the idea of social networks. Likewise, the backward progression of *Memento*'s plot is partly justified by the clinical condition of short-term memory deficits.

Interestingly, traditions outside Hollywood don't require these sorts of motivation for narrative experiments. *Last Year at Marienbad* is perhaps the supreme example of a purely artificial construct, which can't be justified by genre or subject/theme. I'd argue that Kieślowski's *Blind Chance*, Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire*, van Dormael's *Toto le héros*, and other films of a highly artificial cast either ignore or cancel both realistic and generic motivation. They present themselves as experiments in storytelling, pure and simple.

The notion of motivation turns a lot of our usual thinking about cinema inside out. We may think

that a certain scene is present in order to support what the film "says." But actually a lot of what we find in films is motivated not by theme but instead by plot demands or by genre or by appeal to realism. The aim is often not to transmit an idea but to give us a particular narrative experience. And this is, I think, Nolan's aim in his more exploratory films: *Following, Memento, The Prestige, Inception, Interstellar*, and *Dunkirk*. Very few contemporary American filmmakers have pursued complex storytelling with his thoroughness and ingenuity.

Breaking up the blocks

Nolan began as a mainstream fan. Born in 1970, he was captivated by *Star Wars* and began making Super-8mm films with his action figures. This interest in spectacle and popular genres would become the basis of his career. He applied George Lucas's concept of "worldmaking" to his later films, while at the same time giving them recognizable genre roots. *Inception*, for instance, became at once a science-fiction film, a heist film, and a James-Bondish adventure. Once Nolan was given a big budget, every movie would shamelessly include explosions, chases, fights, and cliff-hanging action. He could find lingering genre impulses in superhero movies: *Batman Begins* was a straightforward origins story, but *The Dark Knight* was "a crime drama in the world of a Michael Mann film" and *The Dark Knight Rises* was conceived as "this historical epic." Each genre has a specific thematic and iconographic world, and Nolan was eager to build such worlds anew for each project.

As a cinéphile Nolan was drawn to filmmakers who could develop genre projects in ambitious directions. *Alien* and *Blade Runner* became his favorite movies ("There was a mind behind both of them") and he developed a deep admiration for Stanley Kubrick's work, particular *2001: A Space Odyssey*. This higher-toned ambition was reinforced by his interest in high culture. Majoring in English literature in college, he was drawn to novels of an experimental cast as well as to literary criticism. To this training he attributes his interest in form. "I wrote *Memento* very much as a puzzle box. I was fascinated by the idea of structure." Instead of composing outlines, Nolan says, he draws diagrams, and it shows.

In his early twenties Nolan made short films, including the now-cult item *Doodlebug* (1997). In this noirish piece, aided by ambitious special effects, a man tries to crush a tiny version of himself, only to be crushed under the heel of a still larger version of himself. This boxes-within-boxes pattern would recur in later Nolan projects. While he was finishing *Doodlebug* he started shooting the feature-length *Following* (1998) on weekends. Its premise showed his literary bent by centering on a writer who follows random people in hopes of gathering material. After *Following* got some festival play, Nolan was able to find financing for *Memento* (2000), which established him as a significant young director in the "New Narrative Complexity" trend in independent cinema.

He had the advantage of the learning curve. By the mid-1990s, a wide menu of storytelling options had already been opened up for innovation. Network narratives, in which several major characters move through intertwined situations, had become salient in the 1970s and 1980s and became a favorite of American indies (*Grand Canyon, City of Hope, Lone Star, Two Days in the Valley*). So too were films emphasizing subjective states, such as *Jacob's Ladder*, and flashback plots (*The Usual Suspects, Reservoir Dogs, Six Degrees of Separation*). Often these films featured unreliable narration, with *The Usual Suspects* becoming a prototype. Most of these experiments motivated their play with time and viewpoint through appeal to the conventions of romantic comedy, domestic drama, or crime and thriller plotting.

Another trend that became salient in the 1990s depended on altering story order in a more fundamental way than the usual flashback construction. Most Hollywood films tell their stories chronologically, shifting our attachment from one character to another, scene by scene. This moving-spotlight approach to narration can give the audience a wide range of knowledge, or it can suppress information by shifting away from what characters are doing at crucial moments. During the 1990s Quentin Tarantino showed that a linear plot could be broken into unusually long segments by sticking with a single character through many scenes. Each of these blocks of action could then be arranged out of chronological sequence. In *Pulp Fiction*, a story that could have been told chronologically by shifting the spotlight from one character to another, is presented in discrete blocks. Three blocks are centered on hired killers Vincent Vega and Jules Winnfield, another is attached to prizefight-

er Butch Coolidge, and a briefer one is attached to a pair of thieves known as Pumpkin and Honey Bunny. The scenes within each block are consecutive, but the blocks are arranged out of chronological order. *Go, One Night at McCool's*, and other films used this sort of block construction in order to split viewpoints and show character intersection as replays yielding new information.

Offbeat as all these experiments were, they tended to conform to the dramaturgical pattern known as "three-act" structure, which Kristin Thompson has shown can be usefully thought of as a four-part pattern. The plot starts with a Set-up that introduces the protagonist(s), exposes their situation, and assigns them distinct goals. There follows a Complicating Action section that redefines the goals and sets out the film's major conflicts. The third part is a Development, which largely consists of obstacles to attaining the goals, as well as sheer delay and important backstory on the characters. Each of these parts tends to be of roughly equal length, twenty-five to thirty minutes in a two-hour film. The Climax, coming at the point when the protagonists face a crisis, is almost always shorter and is driven by a deadline. There follows a brief fifth part, an Epilogue tidying up minor matters and showing the final state of the characters after the resolution.

It's striking that even innovative films in the US and European cinema tend to follow this template. Thanks to it, viewers can make sense of narratives that might be challenging in other ways. We'll see that four-part plot structure is central to Nolan's films as well.

So where does his innovation lie? I think that Nolan perceived a distinct way to chop up a single story line. Instead of blocks in the *Pulp Fiction* manner, you could make the scenes more fragmentary. And in place of the traditional framing of flashbacks (a character tells a story or recalls an event), you could simply intercut story fragments according to a certain logic. In this he was much influenced by Graham Swift's 1983 novel *Waterland*.

> "It opened my eyes to something I found absolutely shocking at the time," Nolan says. "It's structured with a set of parallel timelines and effortlessly tells a story using history a contemporary story and various timelines that were close together in time (recent past and less recent past), and it actually cross cuts these timelines with such ease that, by the end, he's literally sort of leaving sentences unfinished and you're filling in the gaps."

What Nolan noticed in *Waterland* was what he would later come to call a rule set.

Artists launching unusual formal projects tend to willingly restrict their choices. By refusing certain possibilities, they can concentrate on a few others, exploring their resources. In addition, this restraint obeys certain principles, and those become tacit or explicit rules. For example, Alain Resnais created a series of films exploring the representation of time in cinema. In one, *Hiroshima mon amour*, the rule is that fragments of past events can be simply cut into the story's ongoing present. (We're very familiar with this strategy today, but at the time it was quite innovative.) Another Resnais film, *La guerre est finie*, Resnais creates a new set of rules: the protagonist is anticipating events, either ones coming up soon or ones far off. These are simply cut into the present, with our understanding made easier by a voice-over commentator.

Rule-making isn't unique to cinema, of course. The British playwright Alan Ayckbourn experimented with dramatic form by creating strictly patterned constraints. For instance, his 1973 trilogy *The Norman Conquests* arranges its story action by space rather than time. One play shows only what happens in the dining room, another is confined to the living room, and the third takes place in the kitchen. An entire weekend is mapped out across the three rooms. The story events are chronological, but when a character in one play leaves the location, we don't know what happens in the new space until we see another play in the cycle. Some events are repeated in different plays, through noises offstage. Ayckbourn's innovation resulted in a geometrical approach to narrative, one that dictated a simple but original pattern.

Nolan would later call this sort of constraint a rule set. For his non-franchise films he would create geometrically designed plots that obeyed certain rules. He would design a fictional world, much as Ariadne the architect does in *Inception*, subject to a patterning that the audience needs to learn. Sometimes the viewer is told the rules explicitly, as in the dialogue exposition of *Inception* and *Interstellar*, or the opening printed titles of *Dunkirk*.

Sometimes the viewer must learn by inference, as in *Memento* and *The Prestige*. And in various ways, the rule set will be implemented through Nolan's favored technique: crosscutting.

Following is a good example of how we must infer the rule set that governs the overarching pattern. Instead of alternating distinct timelines as Swift did in *Waterland*, Nolan saw that you could just intercut the beginning, the middle, and the end of a single one. You could take a story that could be told in straightforward chronology and break it into two or three discrete phases. This is in effect what *Pulp Fiction* did. But instead of presenting long stretches, the filmmaker could use crosscutting to chop the action up into brief scenes and then alternate ones plucked from *within* the phases, zigzagging from one to another chronologically. The first scene in the opening phase could be followed by the first scene in the middle phase and then the first scene in the final phase, before going back to the first zone and picking up the second scene there. If you have nine scenes, you could rearrange them thus:

1 4 7 / 2 5 8 / 3 6 9

You would retain all the advantages of a traditional opening and closing first scene first, last scene last and when the different phases are sorted out, they will form one unbroken line of action. Where Tarantino offered blocks, Nolan offered bits, all subjected to a rule set.

This sort of rule set governs *Following*. The story could have been told in 1-2-3 order. A young man, sometimes called Bill, is drawn into an elaborate scheme in which he is set up as a murder suspect. A classic film noir would have traced how he succumbs to the blandishments of a blonde woman and the shady thief who pulls him into a career of burglarizing flats. Such a plot might even have been framed as a flashback from the police interrogation. But instead of a straight-ahead account of Bill's increasingly dangerous plight, *Following* breaks his tale into three phases. Nolan then cuts consecutively among them along the lines of the example above. A fourth phase, the police questioning session, frames them and unfolds chronologically in the present (mainly on the soundtrack). Within each phase, the action is mostly linear. Nolan is careful to keep us oriented as to which time zone we're in by supplying cues about the protagonist's appearance (sloppy, well-groomed, bruised) and simple cinematic punctuation: a burst of black frames signals a shift to a different zone. Eventually all three phases get linked up, so, for example, the last thing we see of phase one leads plausibly to what we saw earlier as the first bit of phase two.

The hopscotch structure could get wearying, so Nolan introduces some variations. There is a more conventional embedded flashback when the blonde woman tells of a murder. Here the narration for once shifts away from Bill's range of knowledge to tip us off that he is being set up for something. A final intercut passage shows the policeman springing the trap on Bill while, in the past, the master burglar consummates his plan.

From *Following* onward, I think, Nolan tends to think of a film's overarching structure in terms of the juxtapositions you can create by crosscutting. You could say he treats crosscutting the way Ophuls treats tracking shots or Dreyer treats stark decor: an initial commitment to a creative choice, which in turn shapes the handling of story, staging, performance and other factors. Crosscutting is key to his formal project, and one of his contributions to film aesthetics is his effort to expose some unexpected resources in this technique through unusual narrative rules.

Superheroes, simultaneously

Crosscutting has been essential to popular cinema since the 1910s, when it was brought to a high point in the work of D. W. Griffith and other American directors. It remains almost indispensable today, particularly in action-oriented genre fare. The Climax sections of *Get Out*, *Wonder Woman*, and *Black Panther* would not be as arousing without their rapid alternation among combatants, rescuers, and people in peril. However abstract Nolan's early films might be, they did sensitize him to the power of a technique that served him well in his studio debuts. In his commentary for *Insomnia*, he remarks: "I like to crosscut. I like the different textures different locations, sometimes even different times being collided together in a particular scene," and he mentions the "fun" of alternating three different lines of action in some sequences.

By the time he won the assignment to direct *Batman Begins* (2005), Nolan was ready to exploit crosscutting in the Griffith tradition for elaborate last-minute rescues. At the Climax, he crosscuts among Bruce Wayne confronting Ra's al Ghul, the thugs swarming out of Arkham Asylum, and the

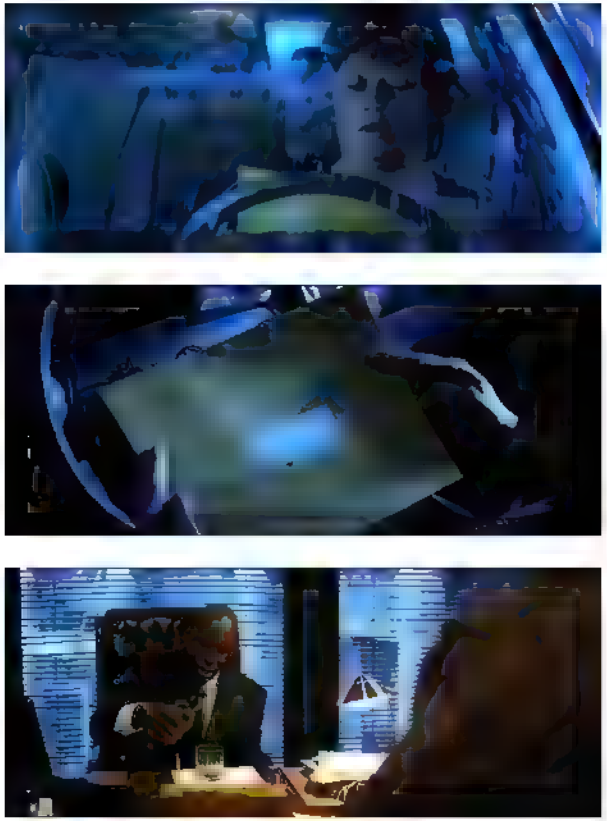
police responding to the vapor attack on Gotham. *The Dark Knight* (2008) uses moving spotlight narration to roam among many characters from scene to scene, and several sequences rapidly alternate shots in different locales. The film's violent Climax crosscuts no fewer than seven lines of action, including a bomb crisis on two ferries and the scene in the warehouse where Harvey Dent holds Gordon and his family hostage. I suspect that this sequence, lasting sixteen minutes, gave Nolan the urge to try even more virtuoso cross cutting in *Inception*, his next project. In the same spirit, the Climax section of *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) incorporates six lines of action and raises the stakes by running twenty six minutes.

Apart from allowing Nolan to maintain suspense, the conventional use of crosscutting may have taught him something about time. Typically, a crosscut sequence presents a variation in *rate of change* between the story lines. One line of action often seems to move more slowly than another.

This disparity can be seen in some of Griffith's classic sequences. In *The Birth of a Nation*, the black soldiers are seconds away from breaking into the cabin's parlor while the Ku Klux Klan is riding to the cabin. But the riders are miles off. If both strands were on the same clock, the Klan would arrive much too late. Crosscutting allows Griffth to skip over the distance that the Klan covers, so the riders arrive at the cabin unrealistically soon, while the glimpses we get of the besieged cabin stretch out the action there. Actually, time isn't really running at different rates. We get ellipsis in the Klan line of action, expansion in the cabin.

The Batman films rely upon this conventional alternation of slowing and speedup. Consider the passage in *The Dark Knight* when the judge opens the Joker's fake message. One or two seconds in her timeline are stretched while Gordon's conversation with Commissioner Loeb runs on a different clock, consuming several seconds. And when Harvey Dent talks with Rachel and is grabbed by Bruce, that action takes even longer (Figs. 2.1 to 2.7).

To speak of different clocks is a bit misleading; we can't think that the judge turns over the envelope in super slow mo. But the idea of different rates of unfolding is useful because it reminds us that crosscutting aims to convey an overall impression of simultaneity. When we look more closely, we realize that the action in one story line



Figs. 2.1 to 2.3

Figs. 2.4 to 2.7

can be slowed or accelerated while another story line is onscreen. Nolan will explore this possibility in other films, where he'll establish specific rule sets that force story lines to run at different rates. Those differences will then be sources of particular effects, such as tension and pathos.

Intimacy and omniscience

Nolan's formal project, I think, centers on the power of crosscutting, but he has often talked about another interest: psychological subjectivity. He wants us to identify, in some sense, with his characters. To this end, the *Dark Knight* trilogy makes use of flashbacks, often very brief ones, to represent Bruce Wayne's memories of his past. As we've seen, *Insomnia* relies on memory flashbacks. It also tries to convey in images and sounds the sleepless disorientation of Dormer while he tries to cover up his crimes.

Yet to some extent Nolan's favored techniques are opposed. Techniques of subjectivity plunge us into what one character perceives or feels or thinks. Crosscutting typically creates a much more unrestricted field of view, shifting us from person to person, place to place. One is intensive, the other expansive. This wide-ranging access occurs throughout the crosscut chases and rescues in the *Dark Knight* trilogy.

Nolan's first two films find ways to reconcile tightly confined subjectivity with crosscutting. They sacrifice the omniscience that usually comes with crosscutting by alternating different phases of a single protagonist's life. Nearly all the sections of *Following* are limited to what happens to the protagonist and what he tells the officer. So a degree of subjective attachment is maintained despite all the time-shifting.

Similarly, *Memento* confines us to a single protagonist. Leonard Shelby is purportedly pursuing a man who has raped and murdered Leonard's wife. Again, what might be a single timeline is broken up and its phases crosscut. One string of incidents late in the story action a series of phone calls Leonard receives in a motel—proceeds chronologically. But scenes of Leonard's investigation in the outer world are presented in reverse order. As in *Following*, the two time-zones are kept distinct through visual markers (color footage vs. black-and-white). The reverse-chronology line of action is filled with tokens and echoes that remind us that the color scene we've previously seen actually took place after, not before, the one we're seeing now. All these tactics make manifest the rule set we need to grasp in order to build up Leonard's story.

Like *Following*, *Memento* helps us out by activating classical conventions. As in film noir, there is the potentially treacherous partner, the mysterious master crook, the seductive femme fatale, and the gullible, bewildered protagonist. Overall, appointments and local deadlines keep us oriented, while an investigation leading us to one suspect after another is a well-worn format. More strikingly, the whole plot, even though presented in reverse order, manages to conform to the four-part model of Setup, Complicating Action, Development, and Climax.

Above all, the formal trickery is motivated by the subjectivity the film embraces. It's one thing to tell a story in reverse chronology, as Pinter does in *Betrayal*; but *Memento*'s broken timeline gets extra motivation from the protagonist's anterograde memory loss. (We've already seen a lot of amnesia in film noirs.) Subjectivity is enhanced by the almost constant voice-over narration, reiterating not only Leonard's thoughts but the words he writes incessantly on his Polaroids and his flesh.

Memento illustrates how an overarching formal commitment brings a cascade of obligatory choices, along with the need to motivate those choices. If you want to restrict the plot to Leonard's range of knowledge, you have a problem because he forgets what happened to him a few minutes before. If you tell his story in 1-2-3 order, our knowledge will steadily grow to be much greater than his, creating a very externalized, objective narration. In other words, if the events are presented chronologically, then we see what Leonard will soon forget. But a reverse-order plot, showing 3 before 2, 2 before 1, suppresses our knowledge of the immediate past. By omitting what led up to what we're seeing now, Nolan's plot structure approximates the amnesiac character's lack of knowledge about what happened previously.

This effort toward subjectivity creates a new problem for the storyteller, however. We still have knowledge outside Leonard's ken—knowledge of the *future* story events. For instance, we know that he will be betrayed by Natalie and will shoot Teddy. Yet our advance knowledge doesn't hurt the plot's unfolding, because this is a film noir. In

a noir we often sense that harm is destined to befall the protagonist. This sense of fatality is sometimes summoned up by a frame story anticipating the protagonist's end, as in *Double Indemnity* and *Sunset Boulevard*. Here, instead of using a flashback, Nolan conjures up the doom scenario by reverse-order presentation. Motivation again, this time by that quasi-genre we call film noir. Would the structure work so well with a Western?

In such ways, *Following* and *Memento* find a structure that meets Hollywood's demand that novel storytelling be motivated by appeal to genre and character psychology. A good counterexample is provided by Gaspar Noë's *Irreversible*, in which the 3-2-1 ordering of scenes isn't justified by such factors. As often happens outside Hollywood, a play with form doesn't need such motivations – or alibis, if you like. Rules can be just there, imposed by the filmmaker.

Memento gave Nolan the entrée to mass-market cinema, and he proved himself with the mid-budget remake *Insomnia*. Later in the 2000s his fondness for certain genres – thrillers, fantasy, science fiction – accorded well with the demands of an industry starting to launch superhero franchises. At the same time, his wide-ranging tastes in art and literature and his penchant for narrative innovation gave him credentials as a self-conscious artist. In the post-Tarantino landscape of modern Hollywood, he would carve out a distinctive niche: the cerebral blockbuster, the genre film that could also be a thought-provoking prestige project. But first, after *Batman Begins*, he had the opportunity to try a medium-budget literary adaptation, and it would become one of his most daring exercises in subjectivity and crosscutting. ∞

Chapter Three

Are You Watching Closely?

Throughout their playful introduction to the screenplay of *The Prestige*, Christopher and Jonathan Nolan speak not as "we" but as "I." The conceit nudges us to notice a plot about duality, doubles, twins, and parallels. The idea of dueling magicians is fraught with possibilities of deception, and those prospects are multiplied by what the author/authors call a "fractal" conception of time and point of view. If there's one thing we can rely on in a Nolan film, it's the truth of the claim in the introduction: "The biggest challenge was the structure."

Transported men

Two London magicians are locked in desperate competition, each searching for ever more baffling illusions. The conflict between the eager Robert Angier and the more sinister Alfred Borden begins when both are apprentice magicians. Robert's wife, Julia, dies in an immersion tank as a result of Borden's faulty rope-knot. As the two men grow in fame, their feud escalates. Robert shoots off two of Alfred's fingers in a botched "bullet catch." In response, Alfred sabotages one of Robert's illusions.

Then Alfred mounts an amazing trick, the Transported Man. Alfred seems to disappear from one end of the stage and reappear instantly at the other. In retaliation, Robert finds a man who resembles him and creates a similar illusion. But Alfred unmasks the stunt, breaking Robert's leg and humiliating him before his audience.

Robert vows to find the secret behind Alfred's Transported Man. After consulting with Nicola Tesla, the great experimenter with electricity, Robert returns to London with a new act: he disappears from the stage and reappears a few seconds later in the balcony. Alfred, usually quick to unravel a trick, is baffled. He resigns himself to quitting the trade.

Nonetheless, he shows up in disguise at one of Robert's performances and penetrates the area below stage. At the climax of the trick, Alfred sees Robert fall through a trapdoor into a tank of water below. He watches Robert drown. Alfred is arrested for murder and condemned to death.

At the climax of the film, Alfred's original Transported Man illusion is revealed as a simple trick: There are two Bordens, identical twins. At any moment, one takes the Alfred identity, while the other is disguised as Fallon, Alfred's designer of illusions or *ingénieur*. So when one Borden twin does change his mind about quitting magic, the other obstinately attends Robert's performance. As a result, while one Alfred is hanged, the other can stalk Robert for a final act of revenge.

More gradually, we learn that Robert's version of the Transported Man is no illusion but rather super-science. Tesla has created a cloning machine, which makes an identical copy of Robert and deposits that at some distance from the original. At every performance, one Robert falls through the trapdoor and into a waiting tank, where he drowns. The reconstituted, identical Robert, dispatched elsewhere in the theater, takes the crowd's applause – only to be sacrificed under the stage the following night.

The rising conflict between Robert and Alfred reveals contrasting aspects of each man's personality. Robert is a smooth showman, one whose highest goal is to amaze an audience. Alfred, less concerned with ornate effects, builds his original Transported Man illusion out of two simple doors and a child's red ball. He believes that a magician has a duty to come up with the most baffling trick

possible, one that will puzzle not just the public but other professionals. To achieve that, the magician should be prepared to "live his act," to give up a full personal life if that helps him to purify his art. This is why the Borden brothers pretend to be a single person. When one twin loses two fingers to the bullet catch, his twin must slice off his own fingers to continue their charade.

Gradually, the personalities of Robert and Alfred change, and our sympathies shift. At first Robert's love of magic is sensibly balanced by his love for Julia. Her death increases our sense that Alfred is treacherous and Robert a victim. But when Robert launches an all-out effort to destroy his rival, he comes to seem possessed. Both Tesla and Robert's *ingénieur* Cutter warn him that he is becoming obsessive. Robert's full monstrousness is revealed when he uses an alternate identity, as Lord Coldlow, to attempt possession of Borden's daughter.

As for the Bordens, one of the twins falls in love with Sarah, a young governess. He risks giving his secret away in order to have something like a normal life with her and their daughter Jess. The other, more cynical twin takes up an affair with Olivia, who becomes the act's assistant. Sometimes one twin must stand in for the other, and these substitutions create emotional disruptions that each woman detects. The dissonance leads Olivia to break off their affair and pushes Sarah to kill herself. To the art of magic, the two Alfreds sacrifice not only themselves but also their loved ones. When one Alfred is imprisoned for Robert's death, the Alfred who's at liberty surrenders his quest for purity. Disguised as Fallon the ingénieur, he's willing to save his twin by giving Robert the secret of the Transposed Man act. The surviving Alfred, the one who married Sarah, relinquishes his absolute conception of magic in favor of love and family. He can return to Cutter and Jess as a humbled, devoted father.

Much of this plot is in the original novel by Christopher Priest, but there it's embellished by a literary convention, that of the discovered manuscript. Adam Westley, a contemporary publisher, begins reading a book by Alfred Borden, *Secret Methods of Magic*. What follows are several other memoirs, treating events at different points in history, with some going back as far as 1866. These texts stand as solid blocks, presenting overlapping time schemes and varying points of view on the central rivalry between the two conjurers Alfred Borden and Robert Angier.

For the film Nolan and his screenwriter-brother Jonathan strip off Priest's contemporary frame story. They start from a basically linear story set around 1900. They proceed to fracture it, as usual, into discrete phases. There is a present (Cutter showing a bird trick to the little girl Jess), the recent past (Alfred killing Robert and awaiting trial), a more distant past (Robert visiting Nicolai Tesla in Colorado), and thanks to Alfred's journal, the most remote days when the two became competitors and Alfred created his Transported Man illusion. These will all be intercut. Instead of blocks à la *Pulp Fiction* or *Go*, we have braiding.

In presenting these four phases, Nolan pursues a fresh crosscutting strategy and a new rule set. *The Prestige* treats its time zones not as if they run parallel to the present action, but as if they are embedded in it. This is partly because we have two protagonists and an oscillating point-of-view pattern. Instead of one character's experience providing the main action (as in *Following* and *Memento*), we have two, so each of those can create its own chopped-up and rearranged time frame. Things are made still more intricate because of the crucial role of two books, Robert's diary and Alfred's coded notebook. Each magician uses these documents to both recount and disguise his exploits.

Stories inside stories

We usually think of a story as a line. Events take place one after the other. Accordingly, most films treat their plots, however complicated, as a single chain of incidents that smoothly integrate lines of story action. Boy and girl face problems in work and love, and those get interconnected. But what if you decide to organize a film so that the lines don't blend tightly with one another?

You can create parallel lines of action, as in *Intolerance*'s assembly of four different historical periods or in Vera Chytilová's *Something Different*, in which two women living at the same moment lead very different lives and never meet. You can imagine your line splitting into alternative paths; then you have forking-path plotlines, as in *Run Lola Run*. You can link stories through a momentary overlap of characters' lines, as in Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express*, in which unconnected people pass through the same snack bar. We've

seen that in *Following* and *Memento*, Nolan took another tack: Taking one story line, chopping it into phases, and then crosscutting them. In *Following*, three phases of action proceed chronologically, while in *Memento*'s two plot lines, one phase moves chronologically and the other runs backwards.

Another sort of plot construction is one of the oldest. The embedded story, or the tale-within-the-tale, dates back at least to 2000 BC and the Egyptian "Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor." In the standard case, we start with one level of story reality, and in that one character tells a story that takes place earlier. Typically the second-level or embedded story is fairly extensive, with its own structure of exposition, development, crisis, and climax. You can of course create a plot out of several embedded stories strung together, as in *The Arabian Nights*, *The Decameron*, and *The Canterbury Tales*. The framing story may be merely a backdrop, or it may have its own dramatic impetus. Scheherazade tells a story each night to postpone her death.

One popular version of the embedded pattern in nineteenth-century fiction was the discovered-manuscript convention, which offered a sort of novel-within-a-novel. Experimental and avant-garde writers have long exploited the embedded story, as in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. The principle of embedding occurs in cinema too, of course. *Citizen Kane* is the classic example, since it embeds recounted stories (most of the flashbacks), a written text (Thatcher's memoirs), and even a film (*News on the March*). Many of the embedded stories we find in films are presented as flashbacks, and those are usually motivated by a character recalling or telling another character about past events.

The task of the author is to motivate the embedded story's presence through some point of relevance to the framing situation. Why insert the tale in the first place? Most commonly, it involves some of the same characters we find in the surrounding story world, as in a flashback. In that case, the embedded tale supplies new information about plot or character. Alternatively, the embedded story may provide a parable or counterpoint to what's happening in the surrounding situation. In *The Sin of Madelon Claudet*, a woman is about to leave her husband, but she changes her mind when a family friend tells her, across the bulk of the movie, about the sacrifices made by the husband's mother.

Perhaps the purest instance of embedding is one in which the characters of the overarching frame story don't participate in the embedded tale. Classic instances like the *Mahabhrata* are often studied as compilations. An example in film is *Flesh and Fantasy*, in which two men who meet in their club recount stories that don't involve them. As often happens, this frame story arouses some interest in its own right.

Once you allow the possibility of an embedded story of any sort, some storyteller will ask: Why not squeeze another story into the embedded story? And so on. Calvino's novel does this, suggesting the possibility of that infinitely extended series we see when somebody stands between two mirrors and the image is multiplied forever. (*Inception* gives us such an image when Ariadne summons up mirrors on a Parisian street.) Hollywood filmmakers experimented with multiple embedding in some flashback films of the 1940s. In *The Locket* and *Passage to Marseille*, there are flashbacks within flashbacks. More daring, and closer to Calvino, is Pasolini's *Arabian Nights*, in which one character recounts a tale in which he encounters another character, who recounts his tale, and so on.

Here, I think, lies the heart of Nolan's accomplishment in *The Prestige* and *Inception*. The general absence of complicated embeddings in modern Hollywood presents an opportunity for an ambitious moviemaker. These two films constitute bold experiments in what you can do with a nested plot structure.

Two books

The ultimate frame in *The Prestige* is the present, in which Cutter rehearses the canary trick for Jess; at the film's close, the surviving Alfred returns to them. The central stretch of this present-time zone contains Alfred's trial and eventual execution. Some earlier events are sprinkled through this as fragmentary flashbacks, but the crucial and most extensive earlier events are filtered through Robert's and Alfred's journals. One man reads the other man's book, which will lead us into or out of a flashback.

In itself, the diary device is quite familiar, but *The Prestige* gives it a special emphasis by embedding one journal within another. In the past, Robert acquired Alfred's notebook. As Robert de-

ciphered it, he recorded his reactions and memories in his diary during his trip to Colorado. That diary, which comments on Alfred's notebook, is later read by Alfred in his cell during his trial. So Alfred's version of certain events is embedded in Robert's version of other events, which is in turn embedded in the moment of Alfred's reading in prison.

This plot pattern sounds complex, but in fact the embedded journals help keep us oriented in time, guiding us from present to past and back again. Sound plays a crucial role in acclimating us to the device. We hear the diarist's voice as we see the reader scan the lines, and this anchors us in two time frames simultaneously. For example, after the imprisoned Alfred is given Robert's diary, he starts to read it, and we hear Robert's voice-over, reciting what he has written. "A cipher—an enigma—a search." The line leads us into the first of several flashbacks to Robert's trip to Tesla. During that visit to Colorado, Robert begins to decipher Borden's notebook. Robert's diary voice-over describes a passage in that text as taking place "just days after he first met me." This segues into Alfred's voice-over, representing what Robert has just decoded from the notebook: "We were two young men devoted to an illusion." The transition to a flashback within a flashback is made clear through the smooth shift from one voice-over to the next.

As you might expect, these embedded stories permit Nolan's crosscutting to become more audacious. One man's story can alternate with the other's embedded story, or with his framing situation. As crosscutting juxtaposes the two men's life stories, we're also reminded of the trial taking place closer to the present. And throughout, fragmentary flashbacks remind us of actions we've seen, though often those are more fully explained at later appearances.

The conflict between the men gets sharpened when the diary entries seem to quarrel. As we see Alfred double over in pain from the botched bullet catch, we hear his diary voice-over explaining that he didn't really know what knot he had tied to bind Robert's wife. "I told him the truth" is followed by a cut back to Colorado, showing Robert reading Alfred's diary as the voice continues: "...that I have fought with myself over that night." Robert looks up from the diary and cries out, "How could he not know?" That external line of dialogue is repeated, but now as a voice-over: "How could he not know?" Cut to Alfred reading that line in his cell. The embedded diaries and blended voice-overs create a tense conversation between the rivals across time and space.

Once the early transitions have established the nested time frames, Nolan and Nolan start to shift among them without showing the diaries or employing a voice over. By now we should have learned the film's rule set. Now the voices of Robert and Alfred are used to punctuate certain scenes, supplying private thoughts in the manner of an internal monologue. For example, on the street, Robert spies on Alfred and his family. Robert's commentary bursts out, "I saw happiness—happiness that should have been mine."

As a result, the two rival journals provide a degree of subjectivity. Two protagonists, each with a secret, take over the story, but the presentation remains limited to what they experience. Much of the action is filtered through each magician's jottings and recollections, translated into voice-over renditions of passages in their notebooks. Sometimes we get replays of events from the two protagonists' viewpoints.

Yet we can't take these confessions as completely transparent. Each magician's journal records not only his trade secrets but his awareness that his rival might be reading his words, so we ought to expect traps and false trails. Perhaps the most flagrant of these comes from Robert. His diary voice-over helps shift among time frames, and his summaries of what he reads in Alfred's notebook substitute for Alfred's direct voice-over. This prepares us for a surprise when Robert skips to the end of the diary and Alfred's voice-over returns ominously:

> Today Olivia proves her love for me—to you, Angier. Yes, Angier, she gave you this notebook at my request. And Tesla is merely the key to my diary, not to my trick. Did you really think I'd part with my secret so easily, after so much? Good-bye, Angier. May you find solace for your thwarted ambition back in your American home.

But in a film of many parallels, even this mocking challenge is surpassed by another. Alfred, reading Robert's journal in his cell, confronts this on the last page:

> But here, at the Turn, I must leave you, Borden. Yes, you, Borden. Sitting there in your cell, reading my diary. Awaiting your death, for my murder.

Alfred is as baffled as we are. How could Robert have known that he would die during the trick and that Alfred would be accused of his murder? In retrospect, we realize that another Robert (the clone who survived that night in the theater but didn't reveal himself) has prepared the final entry, and perhaps the whole journal, after Alfred's arrest as a way of tormenting him. The power of these surprises derives from a subtle shift in the voice-over convention. Going beyond simply giving us information, the diary-driven voices have misled us.

As these examples suggest, instead of *Following*'s rather mechanical demarcation of phases (black frames signaling a shift between phases) and the color/black-and-white disparities of *Memento*, the narration of *The Prestige* is quite fluid, joining distant periods through smooth hooks of imagery and sound. Sometimes the sound comes from one period but the shots are in a far-distant one.

We're introduced to the rules of these linkages in the very opening. Here Cutter's voice-over is in the immediate present: He is waiting, we learn much later, at home with Jess for Alfred's return. But the images that we see shift between Cutter's canary trick and two layers of the past: the top hats in Colorado, and Alfred's recent murder of Robert. Cutter's voice-over, at first apparently explaining the trick he's showing Jess, is revealed to belong to another episode, that of Alfred's trial. Complicating things even more, the first words we hear, "Are you watching closely?" are in Alfred's voice, spoken at an indeterminate time in the past. Of course, they're also addressed to us, signaling the start of a tutorial in the film's methods.

video clip

As the levels of action (the trial, the Colorado trip, and the men's early careers) advance chronologically, they start to merge. Once back in England with Tesla's cloning machine, Robert embarks on his new show, and that closes off the Colorado venture. And after the condemned Alfred has asked his disguised twin to let him say goodbye to his daughter Jess, the action proceeds in a fairly homogeneous block leading to Robert's death and the imprisoned Alfred's hanging. In this final stretch, the plot is driven by the remaining mystery of the Transported Man act and by Cutter's demand that Robert abandon his engine of vengeance, the cloning machine. The journals are abandoned, replaced by more orthodox flashbacks (to Julia's death) and replays (of images from the opening, now explained). As often happens with formally adventurous films, the opening stretches are the most disorienting, but the film straightens out, becomes more "transparent" in concentrating on showing how the story action is resolved.

It's rare for formal complexity to be as lucid and comprehensible as it is in *The Prestige*. As with *Following* and *Memento*, *The Prestige* creates a set of rules that allow Nolan to interweave different phases of one timeline, this time giving some phases the status of embedded tales. In each film, genre conventions or subject matter—noir intrigue in *Following*, memory failure in *Memento*, magicians' illusions here—serve to motivate both subjectivity and broken timelines.

In an era when ambitious filmmakers compete to engineer Web-inspired narratives and to base puzzle films on videogames, *The Prestige* stands out by reviving a very old literary tradition, that of the embedded story. With *Inception*, Nolan will take a logical step in his formal project: What new rule sets can you generate? How many stories can you embed and crosscut, and still maintain some sense of subjectivity? And how can you keep the audience oriented and engaged? ∞

Chapter Four

Dream a Little Dream within a Dream with Me

Complex storytelling, or what we might call the New Narrative Artifice, was a trend that became a tradition. For over twenty years, American filmmakers have been tinkering with a wide range of options. A current screenplay manual lists Parallel Narrative, Tandem Narrative, Fractured Tandem Narrative, Multiple Protagonist Narrative, Consecutive Stories, Double Journeys, and many more possibilities. Hollywood has encouraged plot strategies that would have seemed out of bounds in earlier years.

But once screenwriters become aware of these formal options, the learning curve dips. Innovations are quickly copied. Strategies that seemed striking in the pioneering films are soon mastered by beginners. Now anybody can create a fairly coherent network narrative or forking-path tale. Artistically ambitious filmmakers want to press further, to wriggle into new niches. So how can you create fresh experiments in storytelling today?

Nolan was surely aware of this pressure to be original. *Memento* seemed a natural outgrowth of the New Artifice, but like other innovators, he faced the need to keep reinventing himself. As in the 1940s, when thrillers proliferated and directors were pressed to try new things, the 2000s boasted a competitive field of Hollywood and off-Hollywood storytelling experiments. Science-fiction and fantasy premises motivated the convolutions of the *Matrix* trilogy, *Donnie Darko*, *Déjà Vu*, and *The Butterfly Effect*. Subjective storytelling was exploited in *Requiem for a Dream*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and *Shutter Island*. Tarantino, as ever, relied on chock-a-block plots in the *Kill Bill* films and *Inglorious Basterds*, while even Clint Eastwood toyed with parallel construction in *Letters from Iwo Jima*. The network-narrative format became virtually a genre unto itself, with *Traffic*, *21 Grams*, *Love Actually*, *Crash* (2004), *Babel*, and many more entries.

While all these "complex narratives" were pouring onto American screens, Nolan was basically making Batman movies. Over ten years, *The Prestige* (2006) was his only entry in this emerging tradition, and it didn't garner the attention given its counterparts. So *Inception* (2010) became his bid for a place in the high-artifice storytelling stakes. Moreover, he remained convinced that that "those things that had allowed *Memento* to succeed with broad audiences in a very mainstream fashion could be tapped to make a huge-scale movie." The *Matrix* films appearing between 1999 and 2003 seemed to confirm the possibility: "Audiences are up for interesting questions if they're presented in an entertaining manner."

The enormous box office success of *The Dark Knight* gave him the clout to offer Warner Bros. a "radical proposition.... We felt strongly that we had to do something with that great opportunity."

Working on the scale of a summer blockbuster—at bottom, a heist movie—Nolan would provide his own take on subjectivity, using the Dream-Share device to plunge into his protagonist's subconscious. He would allow fantasy and science-fiction premises to motivate the crafting of alternative worlds, here justified as carefully designed dreamscapes. Although the currently popular network-narrative model didn't come directly into play, *Inception* would weave together many more important characters than *Insomnia* or *The Prestige* had. Above all, Nolan would avoid the block-construction template in favor of his beloved crosscutting. He would now ally that to a project of narrative embedding that would make the boxes-in-boxes structure of *The Prestige* seem simple. But to do it, he needed to create a host of

special rules, and to lay those out he would give a new role to exposition.

Exposition rules

As usual, Nolan's innovations stand out against a familiar background of conventions. *Inception* rests upon the premise is that it's possible to use technology to enter the dreams of a sleeping person and extract information that is more or less unconscious. The more dangerous alternative to extraction is inception, the planting of ideas in the subject's mind.

These concepts get worked out in a double plotline typical of classical Hollywood construction. In one line of action, the goal is for a team of dream invaders to plant in the mind of a young industrialist the idea of breaking up his father's energy holdings. If the team is successful, the leader Cobb will be rewarded with reentry to America and reunion with his children. In the second, more introspective line of action, the dream architect Ariadne gradually learns that many obstacles the team faces in the dream worlds are caused by Cobb's aching grief over the suicide of his wife Mal, which he blames on himself. Motifs of guilt and grief associated with Mal, such as a freight train, erupt from his subconscious and hamper the team's mission. Modern Hollywood has favored a vulnerable protagonist, haunted by "ghosts" of past mistakes, and Cobb fulfills that role.

The two goal-oriented lines of action are fitted into the sort of four-part structure that we've observed in most classical and contemporary Hollywood plots. The Setup shows Cobb getting his assignment from the industrialist Saito and bringing Ariadne onto his team. This section typically articulates a set of goals, which will be redefined in the second part. *Inception*'s Complicating Action involves assembling the dream-invasion crew. Here Ariadne begins to suspect that the invasion of Fischer's dream will pose problems because Cobb's participation will bring along his subconscious desire to rejoin Mal in their dreamscape. The third section of the typical structure is the Development, which starts about halfway into the running time and consists of delays, obstacles, subplots, and backstory. The Development section of *Inception* begins with the first level of dream invasion. The team kidnaps young Fischer in rainy city streets and try to plant in his mind the idea of working against his father's wishes (so as to make him believe subconsciously that he will act on his own). It's in this stretch that Ariadne learns that Cobb's wife Mal committed suicide.

But Fischer has had extraction-defense training and deploys well-armed dream bodyguards to fight off the team's invasion. So Cobb orders the team into deeper levels of dreaming they had predesigned: first a hotel rendezvous, and then a mountain fortress-hospital purportedly containing the plan Fischer's father had for him. As the van carrying the team in level 1 starts to topple off the bridge, the Climax starts. At this point in the traditional structure, we have all the information we need to understand the conclusion.

In addition, the Climax typically features a deadline or race against time. *Inception*'s Climax actually gives us three deadlines as it intercuts the three dream levels. The main plot is wrapped up when Fischer decides to act on the implanted idea and Cobb is able to leave Mal behind in Limbo. In a last-minute rescue Cobb must descend to the most dangerous level of all, the pure subconscious of Limbo. From this realm he must retrieve Saito, the mogul who hired them and went along on the mission as a "tourist." In an epilogue, Cobb is shown returning to the United States, thanks to Saito's political maneuvers.

Nolan's working diagram (Fig. 4.1) shows the film's second half as a series of embeddings. Successive layers of dreaming are supervised by Yusuf, then Arthur, then Eames, with Cobb initiating the descent into Limbo. On the right side of the diagram, the synchronized kicks the deadlines bring the team back to the present, where they're all dreaming in common on the plane flight.

With an elaborate premise defined as both a heist that Cobb must pull off and a mystery that Ariadne must solve, *Inception* would seem to confirm the frequent complaint that big-budget summer films have lost interest in human beings. Storytelling, we're told, has traded psychology and character traits for special effects and slam-bang action. Accordingly, those who dislike *Inception* tend to complain that we don't get to know the characters. Is this complicated/complex (take your choice) intellectual film aimed at adults ironically going to prove that the critics of modern Hollywood blockbusters have been right all along that tentpoles lack personality, depth, soul?

To some extent, thin characterization in modern tentpole movies is itself a convention by now,

so it's somewhat unfair to expect anything else. Still, *Inception* takes the lack of characterization much farther than normal. Apart from Cobb, the protagonist, these characters lack even the spec ification given by today's screenwriting formulas. Ariadne, for example, doesn't join Cobb's team because she has some personal trait (say, love of adventure), or some private goal (say, revenge), or some psychological "damage" that undertaking the mission would help heal. The rule in force is that everyone who experiences shared dreams gets hooked on them, and she succumbs to them too.

If there's little characterization, is Nolan sub stituting something interesting in its place apart from the usual computer effects and spectacle? The clue comes in dream level 1, when the van breaks through the bridge railing and starts to fall. That's pretty far into the film, 105 minutes in a roughly 140 minute film (not counting the cred its). The van's beginning to fall also marks the end of the Development portion and the beginning of the Climax. At that turning point, all the rules of this story world have been articulated and we watch them play out as the characters descend to further levels.

Nolan was well aware of the expectations that audiences bring to movie dreams. Typically dreams

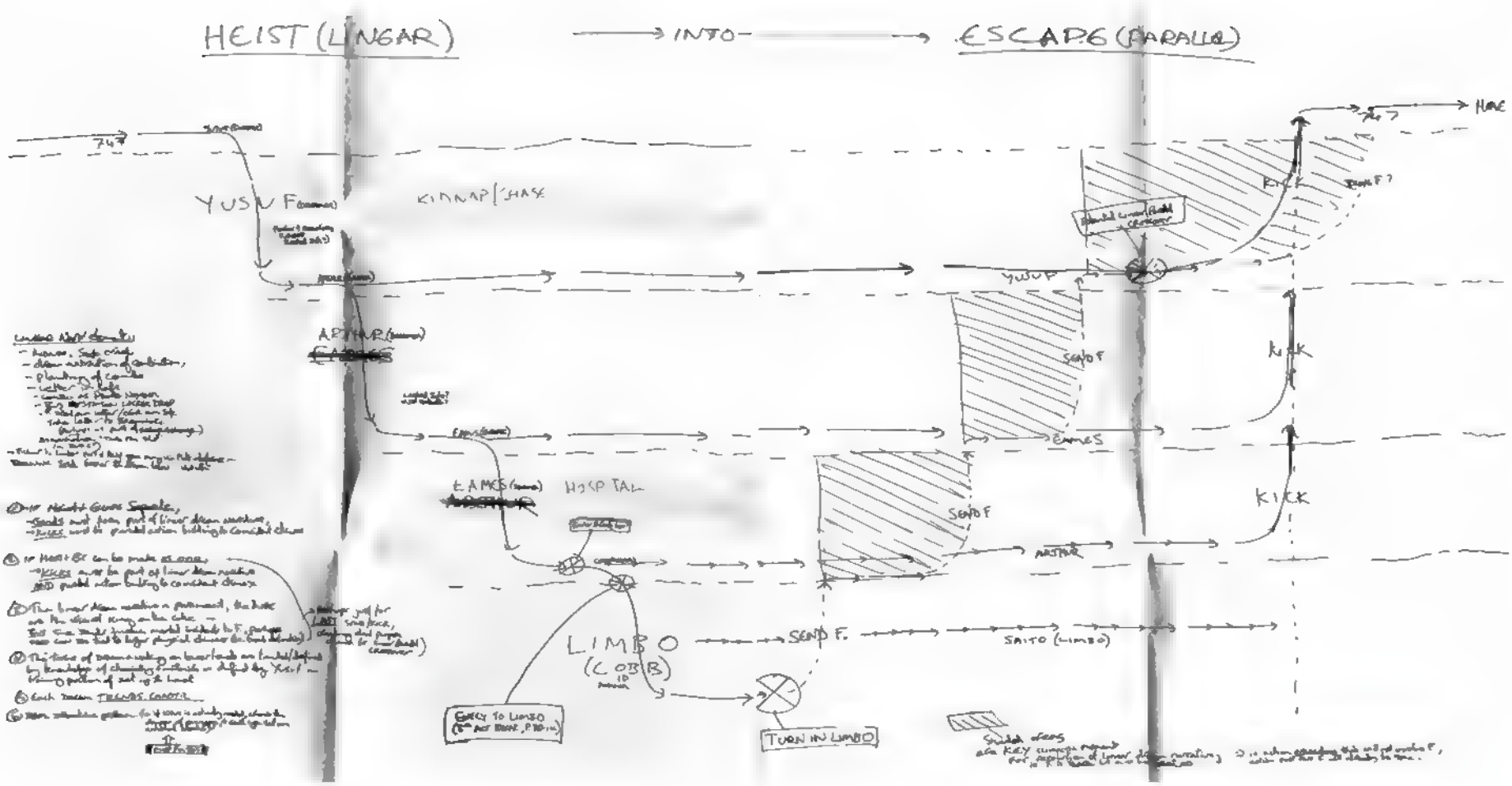


Fig. 4.1

are rendered as either diffuse, soft-focused reveries or harshly lit special-effects nightmares. Their landscapes are often openly unrealistic, and the actions are presented as illogical and implausible, linked by free association. For the viewer, these conventions help us distinguish dreams from the story's waking life. Nolan insisted that *Inception*'s dreams would have to exist in tangible, realistic worlds. And those worlds would need to have firm rules that shape the storytelling.

> I wanted [*Inception*] to have a rule set, a set of reasons that you could graph for why it's not chaos and anarchy—for why it has to be order, and why you need architects and an architectural brain to create the world of the dream for the subject to enter.... The characters take great pride in knowing these rules and that they apply absolutely.

As a bonus, the rules enable the conventions of the heist film to flourish in carpentered worlds that are largely consistent with standard movie fictions. In a normal dream, Cobb might whimsically turn invisible, but by fiat Nolan posits a "lucid" dream state, one in which everything is under control of the master dreamer.

As we've seen, the story world of *Memento* needs a special rule: Leonard's clinical condition, the anterograde amnesia that motivates the reverse-order plotting. *The Prestige* motivates its action by our general understanding of conjuring tricks and one special rule: Nicola Tesla has invented a cloning machine. Beyond the story worlds, though, Nolan builds rules for the film's overall form as well. The hopscotch story order in *Following*, the alternation of backward- and forward-moving scenes in *Memento*, and the embedded crosscutting of *The Prestige* are pattern principles that we gradually learn by observation and inference. We may learn the story world's rule set through tutoring, but the film's formal rule set is something we're expected to construct (with help).

Inception's story world depends on the most elaborate rule set in all of Nolan's work. As a result, the film's exposition needs to constantly lay out the premises of customized dreaming. Characters explain to each other the laws of DreamShare. Each new premise creates a link in the chain of actions, and for the most part the actions are governed by the rules of the procedure: the machine, the sedatives, the levels, the characters' specialized skills, and all the other factors.

In a heist film we learn about the mechanics of the robbery when experts explain the plan. Likewise, *Inception* identifies its characters by their roles in providing exposition of the dream-penetration scheme. Cobb is the mastermind, Arthur his assistant tending to details. Ariadne provides the architecture of the dream worlds, while Eames, the forger, can create fake identities in them. Yusuf knows how to manipulate the sedatives that will carry the team into their target's mind. That target is Robert Fischer. Because he thinks his father despised him, he is susceptible to the team's machinations to plant the desired idea in his subconscious. (Saito says that Fischer has a "complicated" relationship with his father, but it's actually just the opposite: a single trait is all that's needed to establish his part in the action.) Fischer is also to some extent an antagonist, since his training in protecting his dreams from invasion allows him to staff the dream levels with "projections," bodyguards who conveniently provide obstacles, wound Saito, and force the van off the bridge.

The team's goals, apart from Cobb's, arise from the premises of the dream-sharing technology. Of course, they want to get paid, but that's assumed. At first, their actions all arise from the need to sustain the dreams. Later they must improvise solutions to unforeseen problems like the van crash that sends convulsions through the "lower-level" dream worlds. Why they need the money, whom they go home to when off-duty, how they got into this business, and all the other conventions of Hollywood characterization are simply ignored. We're supposed to take on trust Saito's claim that Maurice Fischer's corporation is dangerous to the world because it controls vast energy resources. Making Saito himself the more dangerous tycoon, out to eliminate a powerful rival, would add a double-cross typical of the genre. *Inception*, however, never hints at such a possibility. Setting this aside allows us to accept the caper as it unfolds, without worrying about more distant factors.

Ariadne has a unique plot function. She unites the two plot lines because she knows both the stated purpose—to perform inception in Fischer's subconscious and thus to get Cobb back home—and the real obstacle to the team's success, Cobb's effort to hold on to his dead wife through his visits to her in his dreams. No one besides Ariadne

fully understands Cobb's obsession with Mal, so she alone sees the danger it poses to the team. Ariadne lives up to her ancient namesake, guiding us through the maze of Cobb's obsession by acting as an expository figure in that storyline.

That is presumably why the film doesn't assign her to tell Arthur, who is much more experienced than she is in sharing dreams, about Cobb's dangerous obsession. Instead, she decides to go into the dream levels to keep on eye on Cobb. This allows her to continue as a privileged witness and transmitter of vital information about that story line. Even here, however, Ariadne serves less as an independent character than as a channel of exposition.

In order to lay out the rules of dreaming, the film's narration needs to be omniscient. For short stretches of the film we may be "with" Ariadne and Cobb, or Mal and Cobb, and witness them having personal conversations, most dramatically when Cobb fails to talk Mal out of leaping to her death. These moments provide the main alternative to the exposition-saturated dialogue, and they add up to a very small portion of the film. The moving-spotlight narration shifts freely through plans and executions of plans, stitching together the causes and effects by shifting us among the levels, catching at exactly the right moment the critical action (Arthur floating a stack of dreaming people into an elevator) or dialogue (Cobb asking Ariadne about a route bypassing the labyrinth in the hospital).

The story world's special rules pose problems of comprehension, and once again, as in *The Prestige*, the genre comes to the rescue. Exposition has a special status in the caper genre, as Nolan points out in an interview with Jeff Goldsmith:

> One of the fascinating things about the heist movie, and one of the reasons I took this as the model, is that the type of exposition that in most films is problematic, boring, tricky, hard to get through in a heist movie becomes the meat of it.... It's part of the entertainment simply because the process of a heist movie and that sort of procedure, the way they put things together, becomes the reason you're watching the story.

Usually in a heist film we get a big dose of exposition as the team's leader explains the plans for the crime to his colleagues. Then we watch the plan unfold, with exposition reappearing briefly as needed. In *Inception*, however, the heist explanations run throughout the movie. Goldsmith comments: "Nolan smartly flipped this conceit on its head and instead of keeping the audience at a distance, he decided to take them along for the entire ride. The subtle reconfiguration allows for the audience and the characters to sweat together whenever any hiccups arise in the well-thought-out plan." Goldsmith's observation rings true, in that a heist film typically includes glitches that spoil the initial scheme. Here, the "well-thought-out plan" and its obstacles unfold across the whole film.

Nolan also comments on the idea of making the audience active, saying that he wanted to involve viewers alongside the characters:

> Exposition is such a massive demand.... It's something you have to just try and imbue in the relationships of the characters. You never want to find yourself in a scene where characters are passively receiving information in some way, because you don't want the audience passively receiving information. You want them engaged with that dramatization.

Nolan suggests that the audience becomes involved in the plot not through learning about the characters' backgrounds and traits, as most spectators seem to expect in standard Hollywood films, even blockbusters. Instead, our relationships with the characters (apart from Cobb) come through learning new information along with them and then being attached closely to them while they execute the plan and react to its unfolding.

Yet we are not wholly with the characters in their mission. We move back and forth among the levels of the dream, as none of them does. We may be attached to the characters in the parceling-out of exposition, but we know much more than they do at any given moment once the second dream-level (the hotel) begins. The advantage is that we are forced into a struggle to understand the workings of the plot.

That struggle involves our recalling the rules in force in Dream-Share. The most acute instance is the last climactic scene, given in a flashforward at

the start: Cobb's visit to a decrepit Saito in a very well-appointed castle in Limbo. What enables him to bring Saito back to reality? There's a great amount of dispute about this, but I'd invoke the rule that someone killed in the dream world wakes up in ours. "Have you come to kill me?" Saito asks. Cobb in turn asks Saito to "take a leap of faith" as Saito's hand strays toward Cobb's pistol. We aren't shown the result, but it seems likely that Cobb and Saito kill themselves, which sends them back to the plane. I'm not totally confident about this construal; in the final moments of a Climax, a movie's story premises can get a little loose. (Maybe this is why Nolan primed this scene for us at the start of the film motivation by foreshadowing.) At the least, the mutual suicide would respect the plot's elaborate machinery.

Some viewers find this machinery unsatisfying. They wish to get closer to the characters, as we would in a more orthodox film. But *Inception* doesn't contain rich, fully rounded characters. It's clearly a puzzle film. The *folie* à *deux* that is the Mal-Cobb marriage would be the heart of a more conventional plot, but here it's a mystery at the center of a labyrinth. That labyrinth results from pushing to extremes the usual complicated premises of a heist movie. Viewers willing to accept the flow of nearly continuous exposition may find the film engaging. And from the standpoint of innovation, Nolan has been fairly bold in removing one of a tentpole's major appeals, the appeal of relatively fleshed-out characterizations. Why build a movie on unconventional methods of exposition? Well, there's no rule against it.

The dream team

Nolan's cross-section diagram is helpful in charting the layout of the different realms we'll visit in the course of the action; it's a map to some rules governing the story world. But the film's form has rules as well. We don't progress uninterrupted through each dream level. The film's narration alternates among them. What the journals and the split point of view permit in *The Prestige*, the stratified-dreaming premise allows in *Inception*. Nolan treats those embedded chains of events not *en bloc*, but through crosscutting. And the whole dynamic takes place under the aegis of subjectivity, although now it's a pooled subjectivity, with several characters each generating a dream for the others to inhabit.

The dream device is patently preposterous, whatever Nolan and others claim about the reality of lucid dreaming. Once more, we're involved with vaguely realistic motivation for a storytelling experiment. The artistic purpose of *Inception* is not to explore our dream life or theories about it. Nolan uses the *idea* of exploring the dream life, along with the structure of the traditional caper film, to create a complex narrative experience for the viewer.

The dream premise permits Nolan to add a variant to his evolving formal schemes. Instead of recounting or recalling stories, the characters enter worlds "hosted" by one of their number. The movie introduces this strategy to us obliquely. After a prologue in which a woozy Cobb confronts a very aged Saito in Limbo (a scene that turns out to be a sort of flash-forward), we are plunged into layers of embedding. In the real world, Cobb, Arthur, and the architect are dreaming with Saito on a train; we later learn that this is an audition to test Cobb's extraction skills. They dream that they are in a South American apartment where Saito meets his mistress. But in that apartment they are sleeping, and dreaming that they are in a luxurious mansion where Cobb is trying to discover Saito's secrets. That effort is disrupted by Mal, Cobb's ex-wife, and the dream worlds collapse.

What's tricky is that Nolan doesn't establish these layers of embedding in the order I just did. The flashback tradition leads us to expect to move from outside to inside, like peeling an onion: from the train to the apartment to the mansion. Instead, we are first shown the mansion, and we get glimpses of the apartment. That tactic hints that the apartment is the primary framing level of reality in the film's fictional world. But in the apartment Saito notices discrepancies in the carpet, making him realize he's already dreaming. Only then does Nolan shift to the outermost frame, the four men on the train, minded by a young Japanese hireling.

This has been our first training exercise, and it turns out to be based on surprise. For one thing, the framing train situation is suppressed, revealed only after the main action in the dreams. Like those films that begin with something outrageous but then reveal we're in a flashback or dream, *Inception* warns us at the start to expect sudden plunges into subjectivity. More surprising, we weren't aware of how many embedded plotlines were in play. To have a dream interrupted by another dream is pretty unusual. In the film's terms,

the dream session on the train goes down two levels, mansion and apartment. Cobb says he can go down three, and that forms one goal for the team (and one rule for the film's narration). The opening prepares us for the embedded dreams we'll see in the film's second half.

Later exercises are simpler, involving only shared dreams rather than embedded ones. That's because these dreams operate as tutorials. For example, at a Parisian café Cobb shows Ariadne how dream worlds are constructed and populated. Again, the framing situation explaining that the pair are asleep is omitted at the outset eventually yielding another surprise. The dreams also function as psychological probes, as when Ariadne learns that Cobb's unresolved problems with his wife are expressed by Mal's eruptions into whatever dream world is conjured up. These études have to be relatively transparent if we're to understand all the premises of this game.

Similarly, our most informative introduction to Limbo is given not through dream-penetration but through a good old flashback, when in the first-level dream world Cobb confesses to Ariadne that he and Mal built their own dreamscape there. Limbo changes the rules of the game to such an extent that we shouldn't have to worry about who's dreaming what for whom; a straightforward piece of visual exposition does the trick.

Since a movie moves along, and we attend most acutely to what's onscreen at the moment, it's possible to forget we're in a dream. That's partly because Nolan has refused the obvious markers of classic dream sequences, like slow-motion or color-coding. And we might even lose track of whose dream we're in. Nolan's brother Jonathan remarked that some members of the audience might feel reassured when Ariadne asks at one point who's dreaming what we witness. He says that this line lets viewers off the hook; they can enjoy the film without wholly sensing its formal design at every moment. This is a comprehension problem that recurs in *Dunkirk*, where moment-by-moment suspense offers a substitute for full awareness of the film's time schemes. Here, Jonathan suggests, the multiplication of dream worlds is what's entertaining. "The complexity of it became part of the fun of it."

The most daring embedding takes place in the final seventy-five minutes, most of the second half of the film. Instead of the train seen at the opening, we get a plane. Instead of four dreamers, six: the target young Fischer, plus all the members of the team, including Ariadne, who will monitor Cobb's subconscious. Each of three team members hosts one story world, the other members enter it, and Fischer gets to populate it. Yusuf the chemist hosts the rainy car chase that leads to the van's descent to the river. Arthur the point man hosts the hotel scene in which Cobb accosts Fischer. Eames the Forger (or rather the Imposter) hosts the besieged, snowbound hospital. There he creates the fake dream of the family confidant, Browning, so that Fischer can be fooled into confronting his father there.

That takes care of the inception line of action. Meanwhile, Cobb and Ariadne pursue Mal by plunging into the beachfront/arid metropolis zone of Limbo constructed by the couple during their dream days. It's then revealed that Cobb brought about his wife's *idée fixe* by planting the notion that dreams could become reality. This experiment showed him, with tragic consequences, that inception could work. While the team executes its inception, Ariadne solves the mystery of Cobb's guilt.

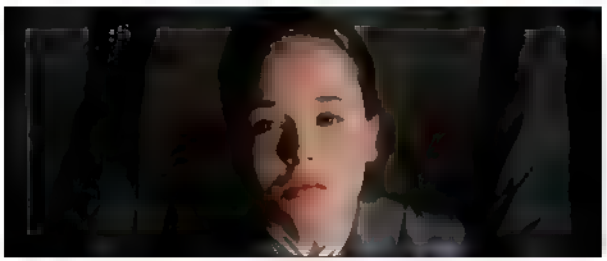
Deeper and slower

So the embedding that we find in *The Prestige* is now carried to an extreme. In the long climax, a group dream frames another dream that frames another, and so on, to five levels. The plane trip encloses the rain-swept chase, which encloses the hotel, which frames the snow fortress, which frames Cobb's Limbo confrontation with Mal.

The climactic passage displays a clockwork intricacy. Nolan has created four distinct subplots, each with its own goal, obstacles, and deadline. Moreover, all the deadlines have to synchronize; this is the rule of the kick, the spasm that wakes you up in the night and which, in Dream-Share, can eject a team member from a dream layer. With so many levels, we need a cascade of kicks. video clip Instead of showing each team member bursting to the next level, Nolan condenses the team's passage by means of quick shots of Ariadne's face departing each layer (Figs. 4.2 to 4.5). She lives up to her name by leading us out of the labyrinth. One virtue of Nolan's fancy structure is that it fosters such little coups.

As if this weren't enough, all the dream levels interrupt one another. The last forty-five minutes

of the film become an extended exercise in cross cutting. As each story line is added to the mix, No lan can flash among them, building eventually to three alternating strands—with additional cross



Figs. 4.2 to 4.5

cutting *within* each strand (in the hotel, Cobb at the bar Saito and Eames in the elevator Arthur and Ariadne in the lobby). Each level has its own clock, with duration stretched the farther down you go.

In this Nolan begins his exploration of a pecu liar feature of crosscutting—the matter of duration. As we saw in Chapter 2, very often the alternating lines of action don't proceed at the same rate. In one line of action time is accelerated, while in an other it slows down. The villains are inches away from breaking into the cabin, the hero is miles away the villains are almost inside the hero is just arriving. We presume that overall the actions are simultaneous, but at a finer level, they seem to pro ceed at different speeds. Some parts of the action in one line are skipped over, while other actions in another line are prolonged. Nolan's interest in this quality of crosscutting is literalized in *Inception*, where the special rules about dream time supply motivation for intercutting actions proceeding at systematically varying rates.

Another clever touch is what Nolan *doesn't* in clude in the orgy of dream world crosscutting: the framing situation in the first class jet cabin. Once we leave that, we don't see it again for about sev enty minutes. We tend to forget about it, so that Cobb's startled expression upon finally awakening mimics our own realization that all the extrava gant physical action has taken place in this quiet first class cabin.

Structurally, this climax recalls Griffith's *Intol erance*, which also intercuts the climaxes of four plotlines, and supplies crosscut lines of action within each line as well. Here, one might say, is one way to innovate in the New Narrative Artifice: Create something like the *Intolerance* of the twen ty first century.

Downwards is our only way forwards

> The film is shameless in its regard for cinema, and its plundering of cinematic history. What's fun is that a lot of people I talk to come up with very different movies that they see in the film, and most of them are spot on. There are all kinds of references in there.
>
> *Christopher Nolan*

Like Griffith, Nolan has hit upon some ways to make his modular plot user friendly. For one thing he situates his levels in very different locales: rainy, traffic filled city versus eerily vacant metropo lis; cushy hotel versus Spartan high tech hospi tal; beach versus mountains. These differences keep us oriented during even the most rapidly cut portions. More subtly, Nolan has, deliberately or not, respected the limits of recursive thinking, or metacognition.

As shrewd members of a very social species, we are all good at mind reading, figuring out what other people are thinking. I know that Chelsea admires Hillary. We're good at moving to the next level too: I know that Chelsea believes that Hil lary is monitoring Bill. And I know that Chelsea believes that Hillary suspects that Bill wants to sleep with Monica. If you drew this situation as a cartoon, you'd have one thought bubble inside an

other inside another, and so on – like Nolan's Russian-doll diagram of the second half of *Inception*.

It turns out that our minds can't build these nested structures indefinitely. We hit a limit. Consider this:

> Peter believes that Jane thinks that Sally wants Peter to suppose that Jane intends Sally to believe that her ball is under the cushion.

Robin Dunbar, who provides this example, suggests that most adults can't handle so much recursion. His experiments indicate that the normal limit is at most five levels – just what we have in the climax of *Inception* (four dream layers plus the reality frame of the plane trip). Add more, and most of us would get muddled.

Apart from the limits of recursive thinking, the filmmaker must also find a way to fill in the plotlines. Let me suggest a general principle, at least for storytelling aimed at a broad audience: *The more complex your macrostructure is, the simpler your microstructure should be.* Think of the very schematic situation in the alternate universes raced through in *Run Lola Run*. Similarly, all four episodes of *Intolerance* culminate in a race to the rescue – a device that was by 1916 immediately legible for audiences. In *Memento*, the high degree of redundancy between memory episodes and their strongly stressed beginnings and endings help us track the backward layout of scenes.

Genre plays a role in simplifying the modules too. Our efforts to make sense of *Memento* are helped by film noir conventions like the trail of clues, the deceptive allies, and the maneuvers of a femme fatale. Likewise, Griffith used the conventions of current genres to fill in the plotlines of *Intolerance*. His Christ story can be seen as a recasting of the many pious Passion Plays of the first years of cinema. The Babylonian story and the Huguenots' story rely on the established conventions of the costume pictures, including the French and Italian features that were popular at the time. And of course *Intolerance*'s modern story is pure melodrama, showing a young family pulled apart by the forces of urban poverty and bluenose reform. Griffith interweaves not only four epochs but several genres.

So does Nolan in *Inception*. He recruits the conventions of science fantasy, heist movies, Bond intrigues, and team-mission movies like *The Guns of Navarone* to make the scene-by-scene progression of the plot comprehensible. The iterated chases and fights keep us grounded too, though you might wonder why Fischer's subconscious projections all seem to have leaped out of a Bruckheimer picture. And of course you've seen many of the other images before, from the Paris café to the luxury hotel bar. Shamelessly clichéd, the image of kids playing in the sunlight evokes fatherhood and family in any film.

As we've seen, the comparatively transparent training and exploration sessions in the middle of the film help us keep our bearings. Another handhold is the convention of the new male melodrama, the husband or boyfriend trying to come to terms with the death of his woman. The simple action movie, from *Death Wish* to *Bad Boys*, uses vengeance to ease the man's torment. The more "serious" plot makes the man responsible in some degree for the woman's fate. The emotional temperature rises as the male protagonist tries to fight his feelings of guilt, turning it outward to a perpetrator (as in *The Prestige*) or inward (as in *Memento* and *Shutter Island*). The under-plot of *Inception*, driven by Ariadne's curiosity, gradually reveals to us that Cobb torments himself for infecting Mal with the fatal idea of dwelling in dreams.

Moreover, the rise of fantasy, science-fiction, and comic-book movies has brought a new interest in creating "worlds" with their own laws. Once you have Superman, you need a secret identity and Kryptonite and well-placed phone booths, not to mention a host of constraints on what can and can't happen. Comic books supply not only a world furnished with characters and settings but also rules about conduct, morality, even physics. George Lucas, in his youth more of a comic-book reader than a cinephile, took over this principle of construction for *Star Wars*. Of course the idea of richly furnished, rule-governed worlds has been elaborated more fully in videogames. Audiences are ready to ride with this virtual-realm premise as another convention of contemporary storytelling, and this habit simplifies our pickup of the rules governing *Inception*'s embedded stories.

There are other familiar features to guide us. A dream within a dream can't be said to be taking place earlier than the surrounding dream, the way a flashback or discovered manuscript necessarily presents past events. So the dream realms can't be ironed out into a chronological structure as the

phased plotlines of *Following*, *Memento*, and *The Prestige* can. But what helps us keep our bearings is our old friend simultaneity, a commonplace of crosscutting. All the phases of the climax take place at the same time: dreaming while dreaming while...etc. To help us further, Nolan's film invokes the convention of the climactic deadline—actually, four of them. So in a perverse way, despite all the arcane rules of Dream-Share, *Inception*'s formal gambit is more traditional than the time-scrambling of his earlier films.

But because we seldom see embedded stories intercut, the result is also pretty daring—something akin, once more, to that sort of God's-eye view of an eternal present created in *Intolerance*. It's just that the events in *Inception* are virtual, purely imaginary. This makes the film Nolan's furthest reach into the realm of subjectivity. How many other films of the 2000s invested so much energy in furnishing the world of the subconscious?

Thanks to the pooled subjectivity, *Inception* marks a step forward in Nolan's exploration of telling a story by crosscutting different time frames. You can even measure the changes quantitatively. *Following* contains four timelines and crosscuts (for the most part) three. *Memento* crosscuts two timelines, but one moves backward. Like *Following*, *The Prestige* contains four timelines and crosscuts three, but it opens the way toward including embedded stories. The climax of *Inception* intercuts four embedded timelines, each attached to a different character, with all of them framed by a fifth, the plane trip in the present. "Downwards," Cobb says, "is our only way forwards" which could be Nolan's motto too.

Modern as *Inception* looks, Nolan innovates by returning to older traditions. He turns the expository demands of heist movies into a principal vehicle of narration, an extended briefing in the story world's rule set. He motivates his experiment through dreams and modernizes it with a blend of science fiction, fantasy, action pictures, and male masochism. The film is redundant and familiar enough to let us follow the main trajectories on the first pass. Yet it's enigmatic, elliptical, and exciting enough to keep many of us returning to it. Above all, the layered-dream motivation allows Nolan to crosscut embedded stories, all built on classical Hollywood plot arcs and gathered under the umbrella of a shared subjectivity. In the process he creates a virtuoso piece of cinematic storytelling, as well as perhaps the most intricate piece of New Narrative Artifice in 2000s American cinema. ∞

Chapter Five

Pathos and the Puzzle Box

Nolan's formal project runs the risk of seeming cerebral and bloodless. *Memento* established his reputation as a wily artificer, an architect of labyrinths. When people needed a clear-cut example of "puzzle films," a trend and term that emerged in the 1990s, they often turned to *Memento*. Perhaps to forestall the objection that his films were hyperintellectual, Nolan consciously promoted each new project as having an emotional core. For example, heist films tend to be "glamorous and deliberately superficial," so *Inception* needed more.

> I wanted to deal with the world of dreams, and I realized that I really had to offer the audience a more emotional narrative, something that represents the emotional world of somebody's mind. So both the hero's story and the heist itself had to be based on emotional concepts. That took years to figure out.

Nolan's detractors would reply that if you take years to figure out the emotional basis of your story, you aren't exactly keen on feelings. Nor will they be assuaged by his comments, in a DVD commentary, that to make *Interstellar* "relatable" with a "human element" he tried "incorporating an organic, people-based methodology into every aspect of the film." The very formulation is pure Nolanesque.

It should be apparent that I don't think that even if Nolan were utterly heartless it would be a fatal flaw. There are some "cold" artists (Beckett, Nabokov, Balthus, Nolan's much-admired Kubrick) who remain of interest and value. More exactly, Nolan's films project a lot of emotion of certain sorts. He regularly relies on the "cognitive" emotions of curiosity, suspense, and surprise, as well as feelings of appreciation for grasping formal patterns. These emotions are central to mystery and thriller fiction such as detective stories and film noir. In addition, his work showcases some types of what psychologists call "paradigm scenarios" that trigger affective bursts awe-inspiring landscapes or city vistas that give a sense of soaring, cliff-hanging scenes that evoke fears of falling, chase scenes that activate a survival response, and bursts of aggression (The Joker, Bane) that inspire revulsion and the impulse to flee.

In addition, Nolan indicates that he expects his performers to warm up his plots. The lead actors in *Memento* and *Inception* "had to open the sort of puzzle box emotionally for the audience and guide them through it." His films have benefited from fine-grained performances that express a greater range of emotional states than might seem dictated by the geometry of the narration. Guy Pearce in *Memento* and Christian Bale and Hugh Jackman in *The Prestige* sharpen and nuance the situations that Nolan has contrived. And against the rather flat affect of the mission team in *Inception*, Leonardo diCaprio's Cobb projects strong feelings of guilt.

What the critics seem to find lacking are the warmer emotions that come from friends and family. It's true that the sort of scenes that fill so many of Nolan's films don't automatically conjure up the passions of melodrama. The protracted briefings of *Inception* aren't paradigm scenarios for sentiment; the film tries to offset them with vivid scenes of Cobb and Mal during their shared dream delusions and her vertiginous suicide, but these still require a level of abstract understanding. (Are we in dreamland or in flashbacks?) Even what should be an emotionally charged scenario, the death of a loved one, can seem a plot device. Jonathan Nolan teases his brother: "Pretty much every film of yours has a dead wife in it. Dead wife. Dead girlfriend. Dead fiancée." To which Christo-

pher replies: "You try to put your relatable fears in these things," suggesting that these are personal to him. But he immediately adds, "That's what film noir is." He's right, but it's not hard to be reminded as well that noir deaths often come off as perfunctory.

Interstellar is perhaps the strongest response to objections about the films' limited emotional range. The project was already partly developed when Christopher Nolan came aboard, so he could revamp it to suit his tastes. Part of the revamping involved, as we'd expect, pushing matters of character subjectivity and time-twisting, all orchestrated by crosscutting. Once more he's able to display his skills in building situations of excitement, awe, and fear. But he has also to master a story of homely emotions, turning chiefly on a parent-child relationship built out of frustration, devotion, remorse, and a sense of betrayal.

Hard science, with study guides

Kip Thorne, the Nobel physicist who launched the *Interstellar* project with Hollywood producer Lynda Obst, wanted to create a tale based on up-to-date science. The popular mind thinks of a wormhole as a cavity, but it's usefully thought of as a sphere. A black hole is less a hole and more a fold in space-time. Because of his insistence on accuracy, Thorne adopted fans' favored name for the genre: not science fiction but "speculative fiction." When the best science is uncertain, the story can float one plausible theory. Wormholes may not come into being naturally, but physics doesn't say higher intelligences couldn't install them.

The question then becomes: Can audiences looking for mass-market entertainment fully understand the flagrantly uncommonsensical conclusions of astrophysics? In preparing the script, Jonathan and Christopher Nolan were charged with picturing these concepts and situating them within a comprehensible plot. Despite their efforts, it seems likely that most viewers don't grasp the deep science behind the film's drama and spectacle. (I was one of them until I did research for this book, and even now my command of the concepts is wobbly.) As with the dream-laws of *Inception* and the time schemes of *Dunkirk*, most viewers probably have only a loose and approximate sense of the rules in force. Thorne, acknowledging how much goes unsaid or flies by in the film, wrote a lavish book, *The Science of Interstellar*, as a guide to what the plot takes for granted.

With books like Thorne's alongside innumerable websites and chatrooms, nerds can do their homework and deepen their knowledge of the scientific concepts the film alludes to. (Such zealous fan research is a current Hollywood niche-marketing strategy.) But even the connoisseurs' mastery will rely on more basic skills of comprehension, such as knowledge of the science-fiction genre and the principles of classical plotting.

Just as the conventions of heist movies and James Bond adventures help the viewer negotiate the plot of *Inception*, the standard science-fiction ingredients of space exploration and time travel ease our understanding of *Interstellar*. As ever in SF, we get scientific explanations galore, enhanced by audiovisual demos and diagrams. There are the initial anomalies—a drone off-course, electromagnetic interference, and cryptic messages apparently sent via a bookshelf. There's the hint of alien intelligence: "Something sent you here. They chose you." The mystery of *They* becomes a throughline for the plot, especially after the mission team concludes that They conveniently supplied a wormhole for easier transport to another galaxy. The paradoxes of backward time travel, in which you can return to the past and try to change it, often become fraught in science fiction, and *Interstellar* will exploit the frictions that arise.

On a more sinister note, the dust-encased America seen at the beginning is suffering a near-apocalypse familiar from dystopian films. The government rewrites history in order to discourage people from imagining escape to another planet. Given this repressive regime, our hero Cooper becomes the tech-savvy rebel. Failed astronaut, cashiered engineer, reluctant farmer, he's a man of action dreaming of exploring the stars. Naturally he runs up against the definitive SF stonewalling: "There are some things that aren't meant to be known." Significantly, the warning comes from Mann, the cowardly space explorer who aims to sabotage the mission.

The other major aid to our comprehension of the action is the film's classical construction. We find a reliable recycling of motifs (a Dylan Thomas poem, a broken model landing craft, banter with robots) and marked parallels (three beer-sipping scenes on the farm porch, Murph imitating her father in driving into rows of corn). These take their

place in a traditional but fairly dense four-part structure.

In the Setup we learn of the vast droughts and blights that are threatening to destroy human life within a generation. Cooper's ten-year-old daughter Murphy has noticed a "ghost" that seems to be sending messages by bumping books off her shelves and sifting trails of dust on the floor. Cooper deciphers the trails as coordinates, and the clue leads him to a NASA facility that is planning for interplanetary evacuation and colonization. The fact that Cooper found the compound suggests to Dr. Brand that alien intelligence picked him, a former astronaut, to pilot the search for a new home. On the ground, Brand vows to keep working on equations about gravitational force that will allow the explorers to return. But as a backup plan the mission will carry eggs that can seed a friendly planet they may find.

Out of duty and a commitment to space resettlement, Cooper accepts. This tears him from his farm, his son Tom, and Murphy, who is angry and fearful, thinking he's abandoning them. She rejects him even though he assures her: "I love you forever. I'm coming back." This is a complex Setup that needs its forty minutes. The length matches the two parts that follow, so that this nearly three-hour film retains "classical" balance.

The Complicating Action takes Cooper into outer space. His crew consists of Amelia Brand, daughter of the professor who recruited Cooper, as well as the scientists Doyle and Romilly and a pair of friendly robots. The *Endurance* is headed for a wormhole mysteriously placed to provide them a shortcut to another galaxy. Earlier missions commanded by doctors Miller, Mann, and Edmunds have found three planets there that might be hospitable. These provide destinations for the bulk of the plot.

The most convenient planet poses a risk: an hour spent there equals seven years on Earth. Cooper decides to chance losing a little time. The planet proves unfit, with a surface that's one huge sea. As the team tries to leave, a massive wave drowns Doyle. Swamped, the landing craft must dry out for a period that will cost the crew about twenty years back home. In anguish Cooper views all the years of video messages from Earth that have poured in during the delay. The most devastating message is the final one from a grown-up Murph. She's now the scientist her father trained her to be, but she can't forgive him for leaving.

The Complicating Action hasn't given us direct access to what's happening on Earth, but here, at the midpoint of the film's running time, Nolan's typical alternating construction kicks in. The Development crosscuts the *Endurance*'s further explorations with Murph's effort to solve Dr. Brand's equation. She discovers that Brand has lied; the mission's purpose was simply to capture data from a black hole. Cooper was never supposed to return, and Murph suspects Amelia and Cooper knew that. But in seeing desperate crowds fleeing the town, Murph is seized by "a feeling" that impels her to return to the farm—not just to evacuate Tom's family but also to investigate her bedroom.

Meanwhile, the *Endurance* lands on the second planet and the crew meets Dr. Mann, the only survivor of that mission. The Mann section is a good example of how Development portions tend to delay the conclusion by introducing new obstacles. Mann has lied about the prospects for life on the ice-encased planet, in hope that he'd be rescued. Mann kills Romilly and tries to kill Cooper, who is saved by Amelia. Meanwhile, Murph returns to the family farm, feeling that the answer to Brand's equation is in her old bedroom. Mann's escape attempt fails, and he blunders into death.

The Climax starts when Amelia and Cooper must decide how to try their last chance. Earlier it was revealed that Amelia is in love with Dr. Edmunds, whose signals seemed reliable, but Cooper picked Mann's planet instead. With the *Endurance* low on fuel, he arranges Amelia to be catapulted to Edmunds' planet while he plunges into the black hole. ("This whole maneuver will cost us fifty-one years.") After hurtling through darkness, Cooper finds himself floating in a vast AV demo: the tesseract. Here the fourth dimension, time, is represented in an endless lattice of cubes showing one location, the bedroom of the ten-year-old Murph, at different moments. Cooper can't cross over to her, and he must watch helplessly as scenes of the past, including his tearful departure, are replayed in one room after another.

But Cooper finds a way to communicate. He bumps books off Murph's shelf and etches the NASA facility's coordinates into the dust seeping onto the floor. Intercut with his efforts are shots of the grown-up Murph in the room coming to realize her ghost was her father communicating with her. He sends further data through Morse code

on the wristwatch he once gave her, and this enables her to solve Brand's equations. The *They* of the opening turn out to be Us, the super evolved humans of the future who have recruited Cooper to be the conduit for Murph's breakthrough. As sometimes happens in science fiction, creatures in the future revisit the past and paradoxically enable themselves to come into existence.

The Epilogue shows Cooper, rescued and recovering in a space station, eighty four years since he left Earth. He visits the elderly Murph on her deathbed and they are reconciled. He then sets off in another spacecraft to find Amelia, which, cross cutting informs us, has found a hospitable climate on the planet of the dead Dr. Edmunds. The film's two lines of action finding an interstellar home, reconciling father and daughter are resolved. They give way to a virtual new plot, that of a future romance between Cooper and another dutiful daughter.

Arguably, the conventions of science fiction and the traditional four part plot structure, along with Nolan's distinctive formal project, sometimes overrode a concern for the "real science." "Chris came up with his own rule set," Thorne tells us, "and I came up with a way to fit it into what we physicists think we know." Some rules were made to favor plot developments. Once we're told that gravity unites time and space, the film can allow Cooper's thumping of the tesseract's membrane to disturb gravitational force enough to knock the books off young Murph's shelf a solution to the ghost mystery posed at the outset. And once the film rules out strict time travel in favor of seeing and obliquely communicating with the past, it permits the sort of play with time and crosscutting that Nolan enjoys. These were storytelling demands that Thorne could adjust to speculative but still genuine scientific possibilities.

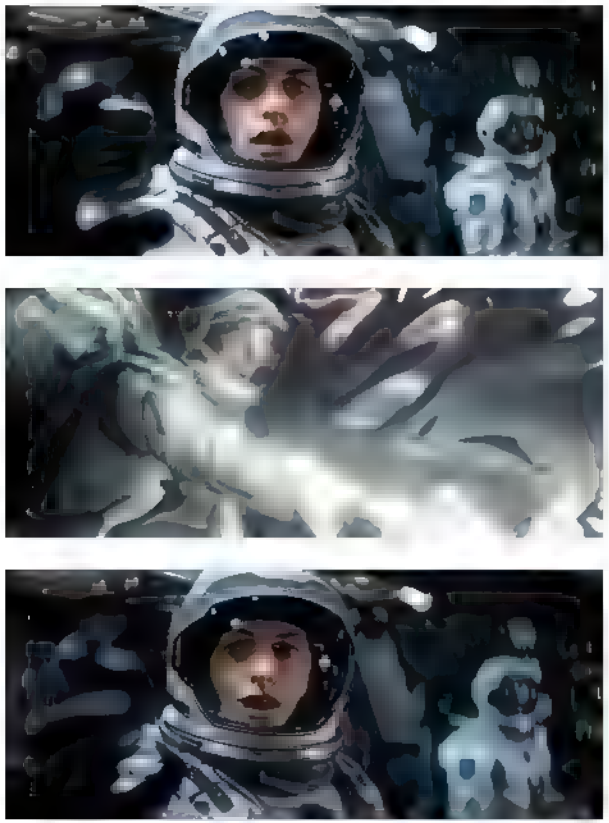
The main point of friction was the interstellar time disparity. Science fiction and fantasy tales commonly obey relativity theory by showing time running at different rates on different planets. But Nolan wanted something drastic.

> When Christopher Nolan told me how much time he wanted on Miller's planet, *one hour there is seven years back on Earth*, I was shocked. I didn't think that was possible and I told Chris so. "It's non negotiable," Chris insisted.

Thorne went home, calculated again, and found that if the planet were as close as possible to the black hole named Gargantua and if Gargantua's spin were almost the maximum, the seven year ratio would be scientifically possible.

The narrative advantages are typically Nolanesque. Once we understand that Earthbound Murph is aging much faster than Cooper, the film can highlight different rates of change in the story lines. But here, unlike what happens in *Inception*, the time disparity will set up heart rending deadlines. Mal is already lost when *Inception* starts, but Cooper has a desperate chance to see Murph before she dies. Nolan's dramatic calculus, which adds in the decades lost in Gargantua, allows Cooper just enough time to get back to her. For once, Nolan's rule set aims to intensify the pathos of the situation.

Emotional force accrues from Nolanesque shifts in duration and point of view. Replays, while revealing new information and reminding us of crucial points, can also gain poignancy. Early in the expedition, Amelia feels a handshake from within the black hole (Fig. 5.1). It turns out to be Cooper, at a much "later" moment in story chronology, now in a separate timeline but straining for what is in a sense his last contact with her (Figs. 5.2 to 5.3). Astrophysical theory is harnessed to formal manipulation and dramatic impact. "Even if the



Figs. 5.1 to 5.3

audience can't grasp the science," Nolan says, "my goal was to make them understand it emotionally."

I have been here before

In all of cinema, Murphy's must be the bookcase most thickly packed with allusions (Fig. 5.4). In it sit items with personal significance for Nolan: *Emma*, because that's his wife's name; *A Wrinkle in Time*, because it introduced him to the idea of a tesseract. Since it's the only book collection we see in the farmhouse, it may serve the whole household. Murph likely read *Charlotte's Web*, and, since she's precocious, perhaps King's *The Stand*, a tale of people uniting to save humanity. Probably it's Cooper who read Ellroy's *Big Nowhere* and the Lindbergh biography. Did Murph's dead mother or grandmother leave behind the Peace Corps manual and *Three Cups of Tea*? Beyond these are

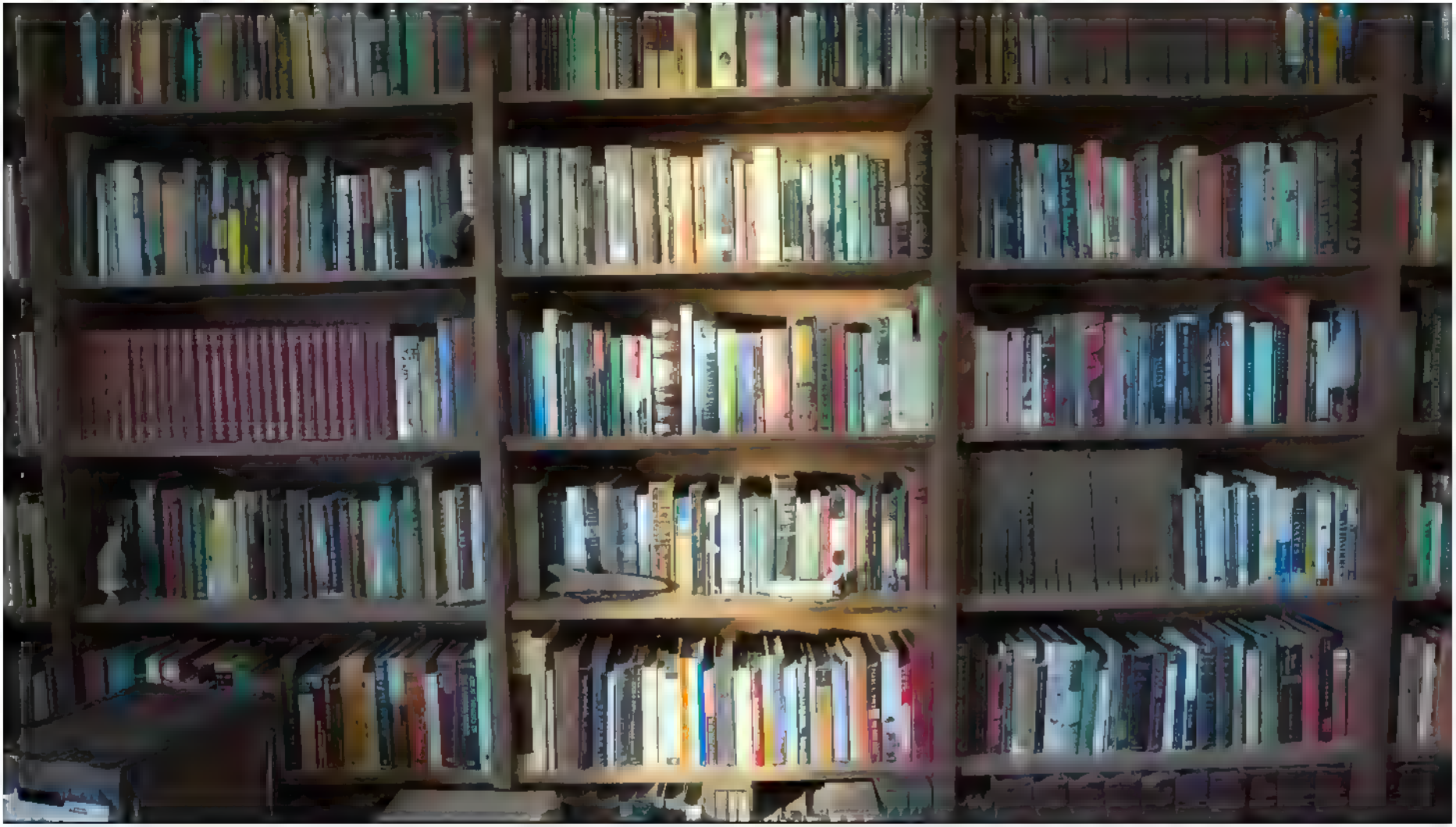


Fig. 5.4

titles linked to the film's plot and motifs. *Gravity's Rainbow* signals how important that universal force will be in the action to come. A father's ghost materializes in *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*; the afterlife is meditated on in *The Lovely Bones*; Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night" is recited at several points.

Of course there are the obligatory books for this sort of story. The camera reveals Wells' *Time Machine*, the multidimensional adventure *Flatland*, the coiled *Labyrinths* of Borges. One author's name we glimpse, although the framing excludes the title, is that of J. B. Priestley. That's enough to evoke, at least in British readers of a certain generation, plays that ventured across dimensions: alternative futures in *Dangerous Corner*, a splintered family saga in *Time and the Conways*, a man discovering a world beyond death in *Johnson over Jordan*, and the experience of *déjà vu* in *I Have Been Here Before*—which, come to think of it, wouldn't be a bad alternative title for *Interstellar*.

Along with these references, the film introduces manipulations of time at the start, though we may not sense them as such. The dramatic action in the opening consists of Cooper crying out from a dream of his piloting days, when his aircraft crashed. His daughter Murphy comes to him. "Dad? I thought you were the ghost." He assures her there are no ghosts and sends her back to bed. Disturbed, he goes to the window and stares at the acres of corn in the morning light.

This story action is framed by material that comes from other time frames, but which ones? The film's first image is that of a bookshelf with

Figs. 5.5 to 5.6

dust sifting down on it; we can see small models of spacecraft perched there (Fig. 5.5). This seems to represent action that we'll encounter somewhat later in the story, when Murph discovers the dirt trails on her floor. Then, against the backdrop of the bookcase, we see an elderly woman speaking, as if to a news crew (Fig. 5.6). Her voice over commentary has already begun. "Well, my dad was a farmer. Like everybody else back then." The camera shows us a ripe cornfield as the voice over continues: "Of course he didn't start that way." This leads to the passage showing Cooper's dream reenacting his crash.

The film, then, is framed by a narrator whom we haven't met. She seems to be recounting events from her past. This inference is confirmed by what happens after Cooper awakens. As he looks out the window, the old woman's voice resumes. "The wheat had died. The blight came and we had to burn it. And we still had corn. We had acres of corn." Cut to the old woman speaking: "But, ah, mostly we had dirt." In the shots that follow, we see the old man we'll later know as Grandpa shoving thick layers of dust off the porch and cleaning the kitchen table. During these images, other elderly commentators, both onscreen and off, explain how the dust pervaded daily life (Figs. 5.7 to 5.8). Soon all the commentators drop out of the film and the action resumes straightforwardly.

Astute viewers may identify the first woman narrator as an elderly Murph; the bookshelf behind her and her reference to her father would seem to confirm it. But the other unidentified

commentators are also framed against bookcases in customary talking heads shots. We might wonder if they're speaking from some present time, recounting the distant events of the story, or voices speaking from within that story's period, telling us of the earlier years of the long drought. They might even be from a more remote past recalling the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

Nothing in the film that follows is as indeterminate as the time scheme of this opening. Much later, in the Epilogue, we will learn that these documentary testimonies are part of an official history of the drought, played on monitors at the space station (Fig. 5.9). In the opening, Nolan had excerpted them as montage material to mark off the film's main action as in the past: the story of Cooper's family and the interstellar mission. By now anchoring these interviews in Cooper Station, the film might seem to close off the frame opened at the start.

Yet at the very end Murph returns to her privileged role as narrator. The still 40 Cooper meets her after eighty four Earth years of separation. As she dies, her firm voice over exhortation accompanies Cooper as he returns to space and Amelia sets up camp on Edmunds' planet. "Maybe right now she's settling in for the long nap, by the light of the new sun, in our new home." Professor Brand was given a brief voice over urging the explorers to rage against the dying of the light, but he failed to solve the gravitational equations. Murphy succeeded, thanks to intuition and love, and she shows with her death and Cooper's quiet determination to find Amelia that one can go gentle into that good night.

Having set up a scheme that created disparities between Earth time and interstellar time, Nolan might have been expected to crosscut Cooper's stay on Miller's planet with episodes on earth. The film could have shown Tom growing up, taking over the farm, and starting a family; Grandpa dying; and Murph at different ages remaining stubbornly distant from the father she thinks abandoned them. Nolan resists the temptation, in order to restrict our viewpoint to Cooper. The key device here is the video transmissions sent to and from the *Endurance*. During his time on the failed mission on Miller's planet, twenty three years have elapsed on earth, and when Cooper checks in on the transmission, he hears of family doings by reports from Tom at intervals. All the family's decades of suffering, including the death of Tom's first child, are squeezed into a few minutes of video (Fig. 5.10). Cooper breaks down helplessly (Fig. 5.11). It seems likely that this, one of the film's emotional high points, provides a

video clip

Figs. 5.7 to 5.8

Fig. 5.9

more compact and devastating sense of despair than would extended crosscutting of the scenes Tom recounts.

As a result, most of the crosscutting is reserved for the film's second half, and here, with one exception, it's fairly conventional. For a brief span, during the visit to Mann's planet, Murph and Cooper are on the same clock. She suspects he has deliberately left the family behind. Meanwhile, Cooper's team must revive Mann and explore his planet. Murph races back to the farmhouse and quarrels with Tom about the health of his son (another useful delay for the Development). The editing pace picks up: Cooper is left for dead after Mann's attack, Brand hurries to rescue him, Romilly dies in Mann's compound, and Mann seizes the Ranger and tries to get back to the main ship. All these incidents, presented in twenty five minutes of screen time, are crosscut to seem roughly simultaneous.

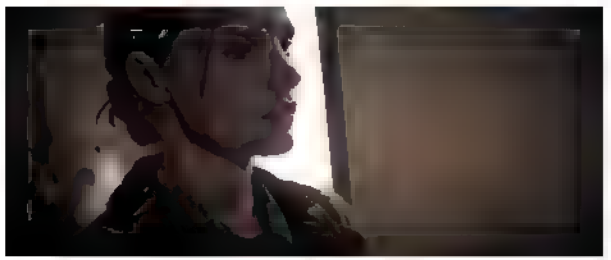
Figs. 5.10 to 5.11

The tesseract sequence, however, is an entirely different matter. Here Nolan finds another opportunity to fracture and shuffle time through crosscutting. He manages to create a time scheme in which the same events coexist in the past and the present, while the cutting allows a character in the future to communicate with one in the past.

The fifth dimensional creatures (humankind in the far future) have created the tesseract to show a three dimensional being like Cooper how to see time as space. The infinite dollhouse of the tesseract shows him Murph's room at many points in the past. By traveling along the latticework, he can watch her when he knocks the toy Lander craft down; this is the moment that preceded her going in to breakfast at the beginning of the film. He can also see her trying to figure out the significance of the books. He watches her, along with his earlier self, studying the bookcase. Through optical POV, Nolan is cutting between Cooper's current present and his daughter's past, but those are in an important sense simultaneous because she's reacting in her time frame to what he does.

To complicate matters, the forty year old Murph has come into her bedroom, so Nolan cuts between Cooper's time in the tesseract, her childhood self, and her present day struggle to figure out the significance of the anomalies (Figs. 5.12 to 5.14). She studies her old notebooks as he tries to find a way to communicate with her settling on sending a Morse code message via the robot TARS. That message is picked up on the wrist watch Cooper left for Murph; young Murph had thrown it aside angrily, but grownup Murph retrieves it and sees the data from the black hole that will solve Brand's equation. Mixing Cooper's time suspended in the tesseract, Murph and Cooper in the bedroom at different points in the past, and Murphy there in Earth's present yields Nolan another virtuoso piece of crosscutting.

Once more, however, it's not just fancy footwork. This twelve minute sequence is infused with pathos. Just seeing ten year old Murph,



Figs. 5.12 to 5.14

whom Cooper has thought was lost, triggers his futile efforts to call out to her and pound on the tesseract. This is a powerful paradigm scenario of desperation, like trying to escape by hammering on a door. The tension rises when he sees a replay of his departure, with Murph turning from him as he tries to console her. At this point, leaving Earth seems the biggest mistake of his life. "Don't go, you idiot!" he shouts as then-Cooper leaves. In the tesseract Cooper finds another point in time and frantically punches out books that she deciphers: STAY.

Then-Cooper ignored the message, but grownup Murph finds it a revelation. "Dad, it's you. You were my ghost." Cooper's regret and frustration trigger Murph's new appreciation of his sacrifice. Now TARS the robot can communicate the data she needs. It's not just the laws of astrophysics that save the world, Cooper comes to realize as he sobs with joy. The lingering concern that brought Murph back to her bedroom ("a feeling") and his transcendent devotion to her made the difference. Whatever Kip Thorne might say, in *Interstellar*'s rule set, love is a force no less real than gravity.

Emotional beings

The tesseract scene is one of several peaks in the emotional landscape of *Interstellar*. The plot is designed as a series of strong affective sequences. The first burst of energy comes when Cooper takes Tom and Murph racing after a wayward drone. It's a chase, granted, but nowhere else in the Nolan oeuvre is there such a surge of innocent exhilaration. Here the characterizations are set in place: Tom likes farming, which Cooper detests, while Murphy is a budding scientist, which wins her father's special affection. When the pickup blows a tire, it's Tom who has to patch it, but during the chase Cooper tutors Murphy in tracking the drone.

The visit to the NASA facility arouses Cooper's urge to protect Murphy, a feeling intensified by another emotional conflict: his departure. She begs him not to go, and in a protracted scene she shows the ghost's message that he ignores: STAY. The scene condenses many emotion-laden motifs: the wristwatch he leaves her, the prospect of her aging at a different rate ("Time's gonna change with me"), and above all the ghost. He explains that her mother had told him that parents are there to provide memories, serving as the ghosts of the child's future. "I can't be your ghost right now. I need to exist. They chose me." The separation of a parent and a child is a prototypical scenario for intense emotion, and here it's prolonged by Murph's last-minute impulse to run helplessly after him. The sequence is capped by a piercing detail. As he drives Cooper absentmindedly checks under a blanket that hid the girl earlier, as if he hoped she were there again.

Thanks to the video transmissions, we're invited to sympathize with Cooper when he sees the family's years of struggle condensed into a few minutes. It's a somber confirmation of the observation made by the robot TARS: humans are "emotional beings." The emotional pitch rises when the final video is that from the long-unseen Murph who announces that she's now the same age Cooper was when he departed. She bitterly announces her birthday, and on this note the film's narration switches to NASA and her efforts to help Brand solve the equations. The videos are affective spurs later as well. The last message we see from Earth, in which Murph accuses Cooper of leaving them behind, is given to us alone. Cooper is out of the ship, so that we can anticipate his shock and anxiety when he finally catches up with it. This is the lowest point in the father-daughter relationship; the tesseract scene exists to counterbalance it and put things right.

Nearly every motif gains an affective charge. After cracking Cooper's space helmet, Mann warns that the last thing he'll see before he dies will be his children. Initially, crosscutting links Mann's comment to Murph and Tom's quarrel about abandoning the farm. But the references to the children become more subjective when Cooper, gasping for breath, remembers Murphy flinging away the wristwatch a painful way to recall his child for what may be the last time. But the flashback also has the dramatic value of reminding the audience of the wristwatch that will provide humanity's salvation.

Another daughter provides a conceptual motif that will energize the climax in the tesseract. Amelia argues that the *Endurance* should choose Dr. Edmunds' planet over Dr. Mann's, and she defends herself against Cooper's charge that she's letting her love for Edmunds overrule her commitment to science.

> Love isn't something we invented. It's observable, powerful.... I'm drawn across

> the universe to someone I haven't seen in a decade, who I know is probably dead. Love is the one thing we're capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space. Maybe we should trust that, even if we can't understand it yet.

By combining that trust with a strategy to communicate data from Gargantua, Cooper gives Murphy what she needs to, as he puts it, save the world. In doing that, she defeats the narrow selfishness articulated in Mann's version of evolutionary psychology that our primary commitment is to our close relations, not those "outside our line of sight." Love of kin can fuel universal altruism.

If *Interstellar* is Nolan's warmest, least hyperintellectual film, it owes a lot to the factor he always cites: the actors' performances. In particular, Matthew McCaughney brings a rakish sensitivity to the part of Cooper. Central to the film's emotional arc is the change from the cocky engineer of the early parent-teacher conference to the quiet, humbled man who visits his elderly daughter on her deathbed. (That's another universal paradigm scenario: the dying child.) Another boost is provided by Hans Zimmer's Glass-like score, the most lyrical in all of Nolan's work. It blends throbbing, cosmic ostinatos on the organ with twinkling string figures that evoke soaring speed, but at times the organ bursts into pulsating melody as well.

From the standpoint of Nolan's formal project, the principles of astrophysics and the conventions of science fiction motivate some storytelling innovations that bear the director's signature. Science furnishes its own rule set, which allows the varying time rates of story lines to occasionally converge. But *Interstellar* also shows that the filmmaker's artistic project is open to a wide emotional range. Manipulations of time and viewpoint, reinforced by genre and principles of classical construction, can be turned to highly expressive ends. Sterile though it sounds, an "organic, people-based methodology" turns out to work surprisingly well. Here, form finds room for feelings. ∞

Chapter Six

The Art Film as Event Movie

Inception was the first Nolan blockbuster that wasn't part of the *Dark Knight* franchise. It shares with those films the effort to make pulp material into something more thematically and formally complex than usual – turning a genre film into something of an art movie. In this respect Nolan follows what his contemporaries have accomplished; think of Wes Anderson and comedy, or Paul Thomas Anderson and melodrama. But Nolan's achievement is somewhat closer to what Stanley Kubrick managed. Like Kubrick, he has made genre films that are at once art films and event movies.

Kubrick built his career on finding prestige opportunities in popular genres. After showing his commercial acumen with *Spartacus*, *Lolita*, and *Dr. Strangelove* (costume picture, controversial adaptation, satire) he was able to make *2001*, a meditation on life and the cosmos in the trappings of science fiction. From then on, he could frame any project as both working in a familiar genre and offering a challenging narrative or theme. Thanks to shrewd marketing of both each project and his image, he invested his adaptations (*A Clockwork Orange*, *Barry Lyndon*, *The Shining*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Eyes Wide Shut*) with a must-see aura. Whether or not the film was a top grosser, people said, this is somebody a studio wants to be in business with. Warners obliged.

Like Kubrick, Nolan moved from the independent realm (*Following*, *Memento*) to an assignment (*Insomnia*) before being entrusted with a big picture, the first of the Batman reboots. As he developed the *Dark Knight* trilogy, he made two films in the one-for-them, one-for-me tempo (*The Prestige*, *Inception*). *Inception* became his *2001*, a genre hybrid (science-fiction/heist film) that proved that he could turn an eccentric "personal" project into a blockbuster. After *The Dark Knight Rises*, *Interstellar* showed that he could make an original genre film that was both prestigious (brainy, based on real science) and an event film. He was another director you want to be in business with. Warners obliged.

There are other affinities. Both Kubrick and Nolan are often considered cerebral technicians, setting themselves gearhead problems with each project. They're called cold as well. In Kubrick's case, his detachment emerges as at worst misanthropy and at best, James Naremore has argued, as a commitment to the grotesque. Nolan, on the other hand, seems to have a more affirmative view of the human condition. He takes strong emotional situations for his premise, however much he subordinates them to labyrinthine formal designs. The conventional device of the dead wife justifies intricate plot structures in both *Memento* and *Inception*, while the love and estrangement of father and daughter humanize the recursive spiral of *Interstellar*. Sensitive to the charge of coldness, Nolan promotes every film by emphasizing how his formal strategies aim to enhance emotion. But I think that those strategies are of independent interest in their own right too.

True, Kubrick the former photographer is the more fastidious stylist. You can't imagine him accepting that his film could be shown in three aspect ratios (as *Dunkirk* is). *The Prestige* shows that Nolan can be a precise pictorialist, but as Chapter 1 argued, he's often loose at the level of composition and cutting within a scene. What he's interested in above all is narrative – specifically, as we've seen, problems of rule-governed patterning, subjectivity, and alternating presentation through crosscutting. *Dunkirk* pushes further into these possibilities.

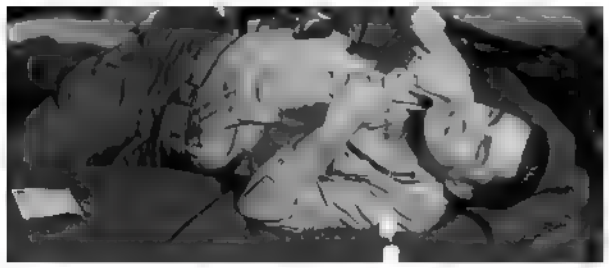
Field-stripping the war movie

The war film bristles with a lot of narrative options. You can focus on a single protagonist, as *Sergeant York* and *Hacksaw Ridge* do. Or you can spread the protagonist function to two pals, three comrades, or an entire unit. Mission team movies like *Desperate Journey* and *The Guns of Navarone* can be tightly plotted, but films about ongoing combat can be more episodic, stressing the long slog (*The Story of G.I. Joe*) or the need to respond to more or less random attacks (*Battleground*). In most variants, battles and strategy sessions alternate with relatively dead time when the grunts ponder their fate and talk about life back home. Letters from mom or photos of wives and girlfriends are a must.

One popular subgenre is the Big Maneuver movie. In *The Longest Day* the Allies' landing at Normandy is given as a panorama across nations and a trip through the military hierarchy. The viewpoint sweeps from top brass on both the Allies' and Axis side to lower down infantrymen, partisans, and ordinary citizens. Although *A Bridge Too Far* stresses the generals' debates about what turns out to be a failed strategy, it too spends time on lower echelon officers.

In the Big Maneuver movie, certain scenes are conventional. We see briefing rooms fitted out with maps and models of the terrain. Because the cast is vast, officers are sometimes distinguished by titles (as well as being played by instantly recognizable stars; Fig. 6.1 from *The Longest Day*). When the film's narration shifts to the grunts, we get quick characterizations that invoke their pasts. Early in *The Longest Day*, a rosary in an envelope reminds paratrooper Schultz of an incident at Fort Bragg (Fig. 6.2). Later in the film we'll find out what this incident was, and what it says about his character.

Dunkirk adopts the framework of the Big Maneuver war movie but it strips away many of these conventions. The only map we can examine is the one on the leaflets the Germans are circulating, and for British soldiers the leaflets' biggest value is as toilet paper. Commander Bolton and Colonel Winnant are the only brass we see, apart from a brief visit from a Rear Admiral. More important, they're in the thick of it, not in some safe HQ reading dispatches and pushing toy ships around tabletops. The action is focused on four characters: Commander Bolton on the breakwater (the Mole) at Dunkirk beach; Tommy the young infantryman stranded there; Mr. Dawson, who brings his son Peter and their friend George to rescue the stranded soldiers; and Farrier, the Spitfire pilot dispatched to keep the German planes from strafing the exposed troops.



Figs. 6.1 to 6.2

As for exposition, it's remarkably sparse. The opening titles avoid stating what any normal war picture would: date, location, and circumstance.

THE ENEMY HAVE DRIVEN THE BRITISH AND FRENCH ARMIES TO THE SEA.

TRAPPED AT DUNKIRK, THEY AWAIT THEIR FATE.

HOPING FOR DELIVERANCE.

FOR A MIRACLE.

The evacuation, which took place from May 26 to June 4, 1940, is familiar to most British citizens, and educated people elsewhere will have at least a bare bones notion of the event. But Nolan is so parsimonious that viewers unfamiliar with the event must take it as a sheer adventure in survival.

War films traditionally center on exemplary individuals, from officers and government officials to enlisted men and women. Even the Big Maneuver movie usually tries to devote some space to the characters' personal lives, especially when a few major roles are highlighted. Often the script will fill in something about each fighter's experiences before the war. *The Naked and the Dead* devotes scenes to one soldier's infatuation with a nightclub singer before he ships out, and after the men are in combat, flashbacks fill in the home front love affairs of the two main officers. In *The Thin Red Line*, lyrical sequences invoke a soldier's memory of his wife.

But Nolan gives us a film that has even less character psychology and backstory than *Inception*.

Even the characters' names go largely unspoken; we must wait for the final credits to learn them. After a film that floods us with dream rules and another that doles out lumps of astrophysical the ory, Nolan was ready to cut exposition to the bone.

> I just wanted to push away from the kind of filmmaking I've been doing where everybody's always explaining things in dialogue.... Having people talk about who they were, or they've got a girlfriend back home or whatever I wasn't interested in doing that in this film.

Instead, *Dunkirk*'s exposition consists of little pel lets of premises.

The opening titles give us the essence of the situation which remains the basic situation until very near the end all at once with written texts. In the first scene, the information is supplied with admirable economy by the printed flyers dropped by the Germans on a small band of Allied soldiers. The one revealed in close up provides the only map we'll ever see (Fig. 6.3). In addition three titles laconically establish the geographical ar eas land, sea, and air and their time frames. A conventional war movie goes beyond introducto ry titles by providing audio visual aids within the story world, such as attack maps pored over by officers or letters from home read out by idle sol diers. In *Dunkirk*, we have much less of this writ ten material. We see only the names of the ships and boats, along with the chalked records of fuel levels. Writing returns explicitly in the epilogue, with the newspapers that report the triumphant retreat, show us George's obituary, and provide Churchill's speech, as read by Tommy.

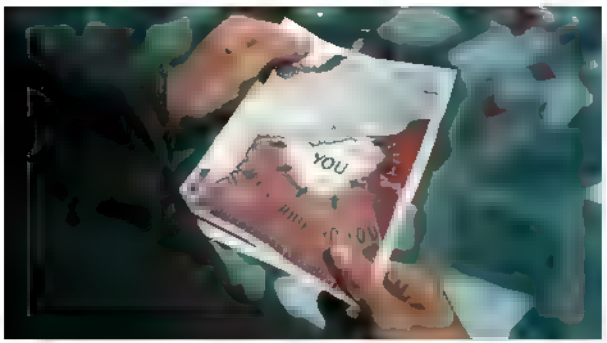


Fig. 6.3

Apart from telling us that the troops are sur rounded, the white area of the map on the fly er explains that the trapped men are on beaches extending from Ostende in Belgium to near Cal ais in France. This lets us know that the 400,000 besieged men are not all at Dunkirk and that we should expect to see only a part of that group. At the bottom of the map is another message, "Sur render ǂ Survive." Apart from Farrier's heroic self sacrifice at the end, this will be a tale of sur vival without surrender.

After this introduction we get mere scraps of exposition for a very long stretch of the film. The notion of an organized, prioritized evacuation is demonstrated rather than explained when a sol dier brusquely tells Tommy that the queue is only for Grenadiers. We see desperate French soldiers turned away from the Mole, where a hospital ship waits to take away the British wounded and those assisting them. We learn all this quickly, barely no ticing that we're receiving exposition. After this, the Mole plotline can run on for quite a while with little further information.

The introduction of Mr. Dawson, Peter, and George is sketchy indeed. We learn that the small private boats are being requisitioned for the res cue effort. Dawson is characterized by his neat three piece wool suit (he discards the jacket for a sweater) and not much else. The brief scene ends with a shot of stacks of life preservers waiting to be loaded aboard the *Moonstone*, perhaps hinting at Dawson's ambition to rescue many men in his small boat. We do not learn where the *Moonstone* takes off from, though near the end it's revealed to be Weymouth, a town quite far west from Dunkirk along the southern coast of England.

A cut to the Spitfires in the sky establishes the third strand of action, and the brief scene main ly serves to allow a voice on the radio to set up the idea of limited fuel, with only 45 minutes at Dunkirk possible: "Save enough to get back!" An other brief scene returns to the beach where we see Tommy and the soldier who will be known as Gibson. They're trying to evade the evacuation queue by passing themselves off as stretcher bear ers and boarding the hospital ship.

We return to Dawson loading his boat. He looks anxiously at a group of Royal Navy officers and sailors checking lists of ships. The officers are assigning sailors to each rescue boat, and Daw son obviously is hurrying to cast off before they can reach his boat. Dawson says, "I'm the cap tain!" indicating that he doesn't want the navy commandeering his boat. He departs, leaving the perplexed officers looking after him. Immediately

we jump ahead several hours to an airborne shot of the three Spitfires passing over the *Moonstone*, now well out in the sea. This is the first intersection of two storylines, preparing us to watch for the more elaborate convergences to come.

After more crosscutting among the plotlines, a Rear Admiral shows up to talk with Commander Bolton and Colonel Winnant. They deliver as big a dose of exposition as we get in the course of the film. The German tanks have stopped and are leaving the Luftwaffe a free-fire zone. Britain needs to get its army back for future battles. The English coast is a remarkably short distance away. Churchill wants to rescue at least 30-45,000 men out of the 400,000 trapped on the beach. And the sea at Dunkirk is too shallow for any but small boats. In what follows, other moments provide bits of information, but they're often quite fragmentary because most scenes are split up by Nolan's insistent crosscutting.

Some exposition emerges remarkably late in the action. Well into the film the Spitfire pilot Collins must ditch his plane in the water. Shortly after this, the cutting shifts back to the point where the three Spitfires are flying over Dawson's boat, watched by Dawson, Peter, and George. Dawson identifies them as Spitfires and enthuses over them, saying they have Rolls Royce engines. We don't absolutely need this information, since we've seen several scenes with the Spitfires already. But Dawson's remark invokes the great affection felt for the Spitfire in Britain and in general helps motivate Farrier's feats later in the film. The identification also adds poignancy to Farrier's defiant immolation of what the script calls "his beloved Spitfire."

A major morsel of exposition that would have been central in a more conventional film is reserved for near the end. On the *Moonstone*, the rescued pilot Collins asks Peter how his father could so skillfully evade fire from the Stuka. Peter replies, "My brother. He flew Hurricanes. Died third week into the war." Almost any other film would reveal Dawson's loss of his son fairly soon after he was introduced. That would motivate his risky decision to save as many other young men as he can. We would be likely to view his actions and statements more sympathetically through the ensuing action, perhaps as acts of vengeance against the foe. Without this backstory, we're inclined to credit Dawson's tenacity to the legendary British pluck that underlies the whole story. Significantly, the information about the loss of the son isn't presented by Dawson himself. By making it Peter's laconic mention, Nolan further reduces any possibility of vengefulness and plays up Dawson's simple commitment to the rescue mission as well as Peter's stiff upper lip.

Often while helping publicize their films, actors describe elaborate backstories they devised as aids for portraying characters, even though none of the information in those backstories would ever be used in the film. Not so with *Dunkirk*, at least according to Rylance, who describes the simple assumptions he had about Dawson:

> Chris is very particular and very much in control of everything as a director, but he didn't micromanage any of the scenes. He really much responded to how we played the dialogue he had written. The interesting thing about this film is that it doesn't have 20 minutes of exposition and back story.
>
> What we do know about Mr. Dawson is that he has a wooden motorboat, which I assume had never been across the Channel before. It was for going out with his family in the Bay of Weymouth, which is a town in southwest coast of England, and maybe going along the beautiful coast. It is a pleasure boat that was built in the 1930s and was therefore relatively new at the time. He has a son, who has a friend who hops on the boat.

There is almost nothing here that we can't learn from what we see on the screen.

At least Dawson and Peter are given a family context and a little backstory. Bolton, Tommy, Farrier, Collins, the French boy posing as Gibson, and Alex, the angry Highlander who attaches himself to Tommy aren't granted families or memories, nor do they display tokens of home. We don't even know how Tommy got those scars on his knuckles. As a result, *Dunkirk* doesn't become a psychological study in heroism. We don't need to know much about these characters. We're inclined to sympathize with people in trouble, especially ones we know are on the right side in a conflict. And Nolan has other tools for keeping us absorbed including, as you'd expect, crosscutting and subjectivity.

Time out from battle

Typically the Big Maneuver picture uses crosscutting in the usual way. Scenes on the battlefront alternate with scenes in headquarters and moments of tense or nostalgic down time among the soldiers. By building the plot of *Dunkirk* around such lines of action, Nolan could have woven them together, with all four men intersecting during the rescue mission. Instead, all that story material appears in chronological scenes, but on three distinct time scales.

Introductory titles isolate those scales around three areas of combat: *The Mole: one week; The Sea: one day;* and *The Air: one hour.* As we'll see, the duration of the action in these realms isn't quite faithful to these boundaries. Still, we're asked to infer that the air battles last one hour; the rescue efforts at sea last one day; and events around the Mole and on the beach beside it consume one week. (The evacuation of Dunkirk took about eight days.) Before we analyze the time scheme, it's helpful to have a brief chronology of each line of action.

We're introduced to the Mole when a young British soldier (called in the script Tommy, one of many "Tommies" trapped on the beach) escapes German fire and finds himself on the shoreline. Evacuation has started. Along with "Gibson," a French soldier trying to pass as British, Tommy carries a wounded man to a hospital ship that's about to depart. They're forced off the ship just as it's bombed from above, and they swim to a nearby destroyer that's recovering victims. But that night the destroyer is hit by a torpedo. Tommy, Gibson, and a Highlander (identified as Alex in the screenplay) struggle back to shore. In the course of this action we learn that Commander Bolton and Colonel Winnant are faced with the overwhelming problem of getting hundreds of thousands of troops across the channel.

Later Tommy, Gibson, and Alex join a group of Highlanders who slip into a blue trawler close to the German lines. Their hope is to wait for high tide to carry the trawler out to sea. While they're hiding below decks, unseen Germans begin to fire on the boat, ripping bullet holes through it. Tension erupts, especially after the Highlanders learn that "Gibson" is actually a French soldier jumping the queue. When the tide arrives and the trawler drifts out, it begins to sink and the men inside frantically try to plug the holes. Meanwhile, the "little ships," civilian craft recruited to rescue the stranded forces, start to arrive at the Mole. Carried out to sea, the men clamber out of the trawler just as a Heinkel bomber hits a minesweeper, unleashing a torrent of oil. The wounded bomber crashes in the sea and flames erupt, but Tommy and Alex are hauled to safety on the yacht the *Moonstone*. Meanwhile, as Bolton welcomes the little ships, the Mole area is menaced by a lone Stuka. The plane is shot down by the Spitfire that dispatched the Heinkel.

Despite the expository title, the Mole scenes we're shown don't comprise a week. There's an initial day when Tommy arrives. He and Gibson try to board the hospital ship and wind up fleeing the sinking destroyer that night. Then there's a final day when Tommy, Gibson, and Alex take refuge in the blue trawler, float out to sea, and are rescued from the flaming waters by the *Moonstone*. In between is an indeterminate period when they're idle on the beach. Through elliptical cutting and the portrayal of several tides going in and out, the film sketchily suggests that days may have passed. One line of dialogue complicates this inference, however. (See the second entry in the Appendix.) At a minimum, the principal Mole action consumes two days, so it still preserves the idea of a time span longer than the Sea and Air stretches, which are more consistent with their allotted durations.

The Sea line of action begins early on the climactic day, when Mr. Dawson, his son Peter, and their friend George leave Weymouth in the *Moonstone*, bound for Dunkirk. They pick up one survivor of a torpedo attack, called in the screenplay the Shivering Soldier. In shock, he fiercely resists returning to Dunkirk, and in a struggle for the wheel he injures George's head. As Peter tends to George, a Spitfire pilot named Collins ditches his plane in the sea. The *Moonstone* rescues him, but once aboard he can't help the dying George and must watch as Farrier, the other Spitfire pilot, pursues the Heinkel bomber. When the Heinkel hits the minesweeper, men flounder through oil toward the *Moonstone*, joined by Tommy and Alex fleeing the trawler. The *Moonstone*, packed with survivors, heads back to Weymouth.

The Air period centers on three Spitfires. In their first combat, Farrier knocks out one of several Messerschmidt 109s but in that engagement the leading Spitfire is shot down as well. Farrier's fuel gauge has become damaged and so he must

reckon how long he can stay aloft before returning to base. Farrier and Collins see the remaining 109s escorting the Heinkel to the minesweeper. While Farrier chases the Heinkel, Collins shoots down one Messerschmidt but is hit by another. Collins must ditch his plane in the sea. Above, Farrier knocks out another 109. With his fuel low, he considers returning to base but saying, "Sod it," he races back to defend the destroyer. There the last Messerschmidt 109 and the Heinkel are doing damage. Farrier shoots down the 109. As his engine starts to fail, he manages to bring down the Heinkel, which crashes to the sea and bursts into flames. Flying on fumes, he tracks the rogue Stuka and hits it before it can strafe the Mole and the beach.

An epilogue shows the fates of the main characters in periods that extend beyond the initial time limits. Bolton stays on the Mole to the last man, and decides to wait to help the French evacuate. Tommy and Alex are let off at a rail station that night, given provisions, and set out by train; they awake the next morning. On that day, in Weymouth, Peter arranges for George's death to be acknowledged in the local newspaper, and at some point that evening or on another day, it is. We jump back to the previous day: as darkness descends on the beach, Farrier glides his plane to a gentle landing before he sets it afire and finds himself surrounded by German soldiers. These last scenes are accompanied by Tommy reading from the newspaper account of Churchill's address to the nation: "We shall defend our nation, whatever the cost may be...."

Had Nolan wanted to make a conventional Big Maneuver movie, he could have confined the action to a fairly brief stretch of time, say several hours on the critical day, with the rescue fleet arriving at the climax. He could have crosscut his four men Farrier in the air, Dawson and his crew at sea, Bolton and Tommy around the Mole at the points when their activities are roughly simultaneous. If Nolan wanted to include earlier incidents, such as Tommy's escape from the Germans or his efforts to board the Red Cross ship, those could have been presented as personalized flashbacks.

But Nolan wanted to preserve these three time spans; that is the film's rule set. That forced another choice. He could have presented the spans as distinct blocks. He might have attached us first to Dawson and the *Moonstone*, following their adventures to the moment before the bombing of the minesweeper. Then we could jump back to Tommy at the start, in a long lead-up to being rescued by Dawson. Finally we could cover the same events yet again by starting with Farrier's aerial combats and ending with his successful demolition of the Heinkel. The film could have concluded with the epilogue showing Tommy and Alex safely on the train.

Nolan's hero Kubrick explored this sort of block pattern to a limited extent in *The Killing*, his 1955 adaptation of Lionel White's *Clean Break*. As in the novel, one string of scenes sticks with one participant in a racetrack robbery. Then we jump back in time, guided by a voice-over narrator ("About an hour earlier...") and follow another man who eventually slips into the situation that's been established. As we've seen, Tarantino executed a similar block-shifting in *Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction,* and *Kill Bill*. But Nolan, as we'd expect, takes another option. He avoids block construction and goes for braiding.

Three clocks

By now a set of rules that motivate crosscutting is central to Nolan's formal project. In *Memento*, editing alternates forward-moving plot action with reverse-order scenes. Likewise, the structure of *Following* stems from treating phases of a single action as different story strands which can be crosscut. And Nolan shuffles order in *The Prestige* by intercutting stretches of two characters' lives in complicated polyphony. In his later films, Nolan has experimented with the ways that crosscutting lines of action can expand or compress time. The dreams of *Inception*, by arbitrary fiat, unroll at different rates; *Interstellar*'s space travel creates varying durations thanks to the laws of astrophysics. For *Dunkirk*, Nolan found another way to highlight the different rates secreted within crosscutting.

As with *Following*, he intercuts different phases of a single action – here, the evacuation of Dunkirk. But instead of tying us to a single character (*Following, Memento,* the first half of *Interstellar*) or even two (*The Prestige*, the second half of *Interstellar*), he presents chunks of time as experienced by the three principal men, all of whom have a different allotted stretch of the overall time span. Once more, his experiments with time are tied to subjectivity.

So the film starts with Tommy pounding through a street, pursued by gunfire, before dis covering the beach, which soon undergoes bom bardment. Cut to a later day, when Dawson is swiftly packing life jackets into the *Moonstone*. Cut to hours later, when Farrier in his cockpit gets the order from Fortis Leader to engage at Dunkirk but "leave enough [fuel] to get back." Midday on the Mole, an early hour on the Sea, and a much later moment in the Air have all been joined by cutting. Throughout what follows, events that are mostly taking place at different times are, as it were, laid atop one another and offset. Crosscut ting *en décalage*, we might say.

Nolan's crosscutting is very intense. I count at least 100 distinct segments, with every time shift constituting a new one. And there is crosscutting within segments as well. When Tommy and Alex are below deck on the destroyer, Gibson is shown lingering on deck and watching for danger. Aboard the *Moonstone*, shots of the rescued men below deck alternate with shots of Dawson steering the ship and ordering others to descend. Nolan is us ing crosscutting for a double purpose: sometimes it creates simultaneity, sometimes it juxtaposes slices of action at different times.

Naturally, the strongest sense of simultaneity comes when the cutting builds to moments when two or three time schemes mesh. Such moments are usually signaled from the air: when a view from Farrier's Spitfire shows the *Moonstone* at sea, when the Spitfire pursues the Heinkel near the *Moonstone*, when Farrier watches the *Moon stone* head for the drowning Collins. These bits of overlapping action may get replayed, usually from the viewpoint of the men in the *Moonstone*. In later scenes they watch the Spitfires pass and they haul Collins to safety. At one point, we're in the air with Farrier when he says goodbye and good luck to Collins. Some minutes later we're on the sea with Collins in his plane hearing the same line and waving to his comrade (Figs. 6.4 to 6.5).

The ultimate convergence, called by Nolan's screenplay "confluence," takes place when Tommy is swimming free of the blue trawler, Farrier is blasting the Heinkel, and Daw son is straining to rescue the oil drenched men. For a few moments, the three time strands are knit together, or as Romilly's parable of time folding in *Interstellar* suggests, punched through with a single pencil point. Then the epilogue phase of the film lets the lines of action diverge, resetting each strand's clock. The rescued men arrive at Weymouth, and Tommy and Alex board a train at night. Back at the Mole, it's still daylight and we can see Farrier's plane burning in the distance. A day or so later in Weymouth, the newspaper has published a tribute to George. Now we return to Farrier, a few minutes past his allotted hour, glid ing the plane down as Tommy reads from Chur chill's speech. Tommy and Alex on the train, Daw son and Peter in town, even Bolton on the Mole all live on days beyond the Climax. But the film traps Farrier in the fading day of the attack, as he sets his plane ablaze and faces his fate at the hands of the Germans.

video clip

Nolan set himself enormous problems with his tripartite time scheme. For one thing, he de cided to show the time frames without recourse to an onscreen calendar or clock. After the three initial titles indicating the places and the time spans, we get no more explicit markers. This pos es a problem of comprehension. Nolan, so often at pains to make his formal design clear, has here created a film that puts considerable strain on the spectator's attention and memory. But before we consider that problem, let's consider another: the problem of how, on a finer grained level, to gather these fragments into a whole. *Dunkirk* creates not only convergences but parallels.

At the film's start, Nolan, aided by Hans Zim mer's endlessly propulsive score, sets up parallels among the three primary roles of land, sea, and

Figs. 6.4 to 6.5

sky. That sort of primacy works at a higher pitch when two life or death situations are intercut. Tommy, Alex, and some other soldiers have rash ly taken shelter in a fishing trawler, hoping that the tide will carry them away from the beach. But they get pinned inside by target fire. The tide has indeed pulled them out to sea, but the hold is tak ing on water at the "same time" (not) that Collins, trapped in the cockpit of his ditched plane, is him self about to drown. The two scenes are intercut.

At the climax, the gestures of rescue are ex uberantly crosscut: Dawson hauling onto the *Moonstone* the oily survivors of the blasted mine sweeper, the civilians helping the stranded sol diers clamber aboard their boats. In this video clip passage, Nolan daringly cuts single shots of Dawson's *Moonstone* moving as if in sync with the impromptu flotilla. Actually, he is quite some distance from the beach, having started from much further west than the vanguard of the flotil la. But the crosscutting makes him visually one of the fleet near the Mole (Figs. 6.6 to 6.9).

We've seen that normal exposition is largely missing from the film, but the crosscutting yields some ripple effects in alerting us to information. The plot can explain something through the ac tion of one thread and have that knowledge carry over into the others. Consider the scene in which Dawson and Peter rescue the Shivering Sailor from a nearly sunken ship. George asks him, "You want to come below? Much warmer." The Sailor refuses, terrified, and Dawson tells George, "Leave him be, George. He feels safer on deck. You'd be, too, if you had been bombed."

Immediately before this scene we had wit nessed the hospital ship hit, with men leaping into the sea. There had been no attention paid to those, if any, below deck. But right after the scene show ing Dawson mentioning feeling safe on deck, there begins the extended action of Tommy and Gibson being ferried to a destroyer where a nurse sends the men below to get sandwiches. The door is locked behind them, and Alex asks Tommy where his friend went. Tommy replies, "Looking for a quick way out. In case we go down." Our sense of the danger of being below is heightened by what we've witnessed in Dawson's line of action.

Tommy's ship does go down, with the men and nurses trapped underwater in the locked room until Gibson opens the door and lets some, includ ing Tommy and Alex, escape. The notion of being trapped below deck becomes a major part of sub sequent scenes, as Gibson finally drowns when he cannot make it out of the swamped derelict ship. At one point the attacks cause such chaos that men in the sea are crawling onto a sinking ship's top deck while at the same time men on lower decks are plunging into the water.

Similarly, just after Tommy and Gibson take refuge in the bowels of the second ship, the Shiv ering Soldier tells Dawson he refuses to return to Dunkirk because his ship was hit by a torpedo. Soon enough we see a torpedo rip open the ship and plunge Tommy, Gibson, and Alex into the night sea. And soon after that, when they try to climb into a lifeboat, they're told by an officer to stay in the water: it's the Shivering Soldier, pre PTSD. (Presumably he was the victim of a sec

Figs. 6.6 to 6.9

ond, later torpedo attack.) The contrast between his cool efficiency near the Mole and his spasm of cowardice on the *Moonstone* is another proof of war's disastrous impact on warriors.

Once more, Nolan exploits the fact that cross cutting often runs its strands of action at different rates. But more pointedly than in *Inception* and *Interstellar*, he lets us see how events on different time scales can mirror one another, or harmonize, or split off, or momentarily fuse. He summons up alignments, shifts, and echoes, glimpses of things that take on importance only retrospectively.

The war movie as thriller

Suspense, it seems apparent, is the dominant emo tion solicited by *Dunkirk*. Granted, suspense is an ingredient of any war picture. Alongside GHQ debates about strategy, the Big Maneuver movie includes episodes aiming at momentary tension. The raid on the French village in *The Longest Day* offers the painful spectacle of parachuters being shot down like a flock of geese, while *A Bridge Too Far* shows an officer trapped in a Dutch household as Nazis surround him. Nolan's strategy, though, is to make virtually his entire film an exercise in suspense. He understands that pure suspense doesn't require us to like or even know a lot about the characters. We can feel tension in relation to characters we don't like (e.g., Bruno's reaching for the lighter in *Strangers on a Train*) or characters we don't know much about at all.

After the family bonding sentiments on dis play in *Interstellar*, *Dunkirk* offers a cascade of primal dangers, an anthology of narrow escapes and last minute rescues. The whole film is a race against time, enclosing mini races. Nolan plays on fears of being crushed, swallowed by darkness, blasted to bits, and shot out of the sky. How many ways can you drown in a sinking ship, under a flaming oil slick, inside a Spitfire cockpit? The ap peals are elemental and irresistible; a child of five could understand the menaces here.

This catalogue of stark situations takes us straight back to silent cinema, to cliffhangers, Griffith rescues, and Lang's dungeons filling with water. Nolan points out:

> Dunkirk is all about physical process, all about tension in the moment, not backstories. It's all about "Can this guy get across a plank over this hole?"

Those who want films to focus only on high er things, big ideas or subtle emotions, miss the visceral dimension of cinema. This belief has led critics to avoid analyzing musicals, cop thrillers, Asian martial arts films, and Eisenstein's action sequences. *The Battleship Potemkin*, *Police Story*, *The Raid: Redemption*, and much other excellent cinema happily passes The Plank Test.

Does this make the film superficial? Nolan ex plains that even in the absence of characteriza tion, the technique of suspense triggers involun tary, universal responses. Consider again Tommy and the plank. "We care about him. We don't want him to fall down. We care about these people be cause we're human beings and we have that basic empathy."

In creating the suspense, Nolan went, as he puts it, "in a more Hitchcock direction." That entails playing between restricted and more unrestrict ed point of view. Sometimes we're limited to what a character knows or sees or hears, and some times we know more than the character does. In *Dunkirk*, we're largely attached to individuals. Not only do we not see the GHQ strategizing, we aren't taken into the enemy camp. From the start, when gunfire drives Tommy down the Dunkirk streets, the attacks come from offscreen. Only at the very end will blurry Nazi shaped figures appear behind the captured pilot Farrier (Fig. 6.10).

> In the end, the key for me was reading a lot of firsthand accounts of the people who were there. It became apparent to me that the subjective approach really putting the audience on the beach with the characters, putting them in the cockpit of the plane, putting them on one of the boats coming across to help that was going to be the way to tell the story and get across this much bigger picture.

Fig. 6.10

To drive home what it feels like to just barely get by, Nolan ties us tightly to Tommy the foot soldier, Mr. Dawson and his son Peter on their boat, and Farrier the Spitfire pilot, with side visits to Commander Bolton on the Mole. Sometimes Nolan supplies optical POV shots, but more generally he simply confines us to what happens in these men's ken. The result is both surprise when the bullets or bombers appear and suspense, when we cut between Tommy and other soldiers swamped below deck while Gibson struggles to open the hatch and free them.

Even the clicking shut of a cabin latch or not clicking it shut generates tension, heightened by the ticking of Hans Zimmer's score. The emblem of Nolan's narrational strategy might be the pitiless shot showing Tommy flattened while bombs drop one by one behind him, coming inexorably closer to us. Nolan turned superhero films, science-fiction films, and a costume picture like *The Prestige* into ticking-clock thrillers, and now he does it with a war movie.

From this standpoint, the almost negligible exposition becomes a test of how little it takes to arouse us emotionally. The crosscutting, the music, the choice of a small number of point-of-view figures to personalize the actions of a much larger group all these techniques suffice to keep us committed to their well-being.

The limiting of viewpoint reinforces Nolan's perennial concern with subjectivity, I think, but it's also there as a strain within the tradition of war fiction and film. Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* is like a diary, told in first-person present tense but with flashbacks in the past tense. *Catch-22* (1961) is in long stretches tied to Yossarian's jumbled memories of flight missions and hospital stays. Terrence Malick's adaptation of *The Thin Red Line*, a film Nolan much admires, turns James Jones' third-person novel into a soaring fantasia on war as both a violation of nature and an extension of it, with flashbacks and brooding soliloquys. But in keeping with *Dunkirk*'s starkness, Nolan avoids the deeper registers of subjectivity he's explored before. No memories, no dreams or fantasies, just brute happenings and the stubborn physical demands of earth and rock and water.

The primacy of survival and the shifting attachment to a few characters make *Dunkirk* a fusillade of hairbreadth escapes from the first scene to nearly the last. The film, Nolan says, is all climax.

> For me, this film was always going to play like the third act of a bigger film. There have been films that have done this in recent years, like George Miller's last *Mad Max* film, *Fury Road*, or Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*, where you're dealing with things as the characters deal with them.

In effect, what Nolan has done is to start his film roughly in the middle of what we've argued is a conventional four-part plot scheme. *Dunkirk* skips the Setup and Complicating Action portions and bases itself in what would ordinarily be a film's Development and its Climax. A Development section consists of obstacles and delays, and these comprise most of the action of this film before the Heinkel's bombardment of the minesweeper. In most Climax sections we know everything we need to know about the action. All the relevant motivations and backstory have been supplied in the earlier stretches, so we can concentrate solely on what happens next. In *Dunkirk*, we don't see those prior sections, so we're plunged into the prolonged tension characteristic of developments and climaxes. Throughout, the sparse exposition suffices to sustain the suspense.

Needless to say, the suspense is amplified by the crosscutting of the different periods, as Nolan recognizes.

> You have three different intertwined storylines, and you have them peaking at different moments, so that the idea is that you always feel like you're about to hit when you're hitting the climax of one episode of the story...then another one is halfway through and the other one is just beginning. So there's always a payoff.

Nolan compares this to the "corkscrew" effect of the Shepard Tone in music, which David Julyan used in the drone soundtrack of *The Prestige*.

Taken along with the minimal exposition, the strategy of unremitting climax helps the spectator manage the most challenging aspect of the film's form: the three disparate time schemes. Titles showing passing time, superimposed on the scene's action, have become common in modern film, but Nolan's constant crosscutting would have made those distracting. But without them, in the conditions of ordinary viewing, how firmly can we register the disparities? Tommy and Gibson running with the stretcher are rapidly crosscut

with two actions—Dawson casting off, the Fortis Spitfires heading toward Dunkirk—that occur at different points in a later day. Dawson's argument with the Shivering Soldier takes place hours before Farrier pursues the Heinkel and at least one day after Tommy is swimming to shore from the torpedoed destroyer. Yet all these incidents are cut together.

It seems likely that on the whole spectators don't sustain an ongoing sense of the time gaps among air, sea, and land. The fugal piling up of situations obliges the spectator to pay little attention to the competing time spans and concentrate on the immediate window of what's happening from moment to moment in each one. The filmmakers seem to have recognized that the fine grain of this structure would be imperceptible for many viewers. Editor Lee Smith observes: "If the audience is watching this film and they're not completely keeping up with the timeline changes, it's not going to spoil the movie." Nolan, after noting that *Dunkirk* has the most complicated structure of any of his films, adds: "We have to make it flow for an audience regardless of observing the structure." I've talked to viewers who, forgetting the opening titles, weren't even aware of the triple time scheme. Yet they still professed to have enjoyed the film.

Granted, the three clocks can emerge as salient when the story lines converge. Still, we're not obliged to sense the overall architecture as palpably as in, say, *Inception* or *Interstellar*. Instead, the disparate time spans serve mostly to motivate constantly building up emotionally charged situations. A more orthodox war picture, with all its down time of tensely relaxing soldiers and stretches of dialogue about strategy and tactics, wouldn't permit the cascade of climaxes that the triple structure permits, thanks to crosscutting.

Redefining heroism

All the strategies of laconic exposition, subjective attachment, constant crosscutting, and a feeling of relentless menace contribute to a major effect of the film. Because of the imminence of danger, heroism gets redefined as luck and endurance.

War is here conceived as desperate retreat. Tommy flees German bullets to confront thousands of other men trapped on a beach.. The French boy known as Gibson steals boots and an identity in order to get off Dunkirk sooner. He and Tommy try to slip on board a departing Red Cross ship. After that fails, they hide among the pilings. When the ship is hit, they leap into the water, the better to pretend to have been among the survivors and get a new ride. The Shivering Soldier wants to cut and run, and the soldiers who drift beyond the perimeter plan to use the blue trawler to carry them to safety, jumping the evacuation queue. All too often, despite isolated acts of aid and comfort, it's every man for himself.

At one point Alex claims "Survival's not fair." Too right. Mr. Dawson risks his and his son's life to save some unknown men, while the lad George, who joined them on impulse and promised to be useful, dies before he can do much. The closest the film comes to standard war-movie heroics is Farrier's cutting down enemy aircraft. And he doesn't make it back.

By plunging Tommy and his counterparts into almost unremitting peril, Nolan's suspense tactics lower the bar for heroism, making us hope that they simply get away, somehow. Without knowing much about them, we can still root for them as men in a deadly spot. Trapped on land and sea, you can't fight dive bombers, U-boats, and marksmen squeezing in from the perimeter.

At the end, as the boys disembark at Weymouth, the issue becomes whether they'll be welcomed. Alex is convinced that they're hated: "We've let you down." Even the reassurance from an old man doesn't encourage him. Alex relents a little when he's cheerfully offered beer and then hears Tommy's flat reading of Churchill's measured stance: Yes, it was "a colossal military disaster," but the British will continue to fight, and a new world will be born. Survival, the only alternative to Surrender, is enough. Thanks to Nolan's crosscutting, individuals at different points in time are shown pulling together to make retreat its own victory.

Nolan has taken the conventions of the war picture, with its reliance on multiple protagonists, grand maneuvers, and parallel and converging lines of action, and subjected them to the sort of experimentation characteristic of art cinema. All the formal strategies the three clocks, the crosscutting, the absence of backstory, the merely glimpsed convergences, the interplay of viewpoints yield a fresh approach to a familiar genre. *Dunkirk* is an imaginative effort to innovate within the bounds of Hollywood's storytelling tradition. ∞

Midcult Auteur?

Nolan presents a problem for those of us interested in how film aesthetics develops over history. His most stylistically disciplined films, *Memento* and *The Prestige*, show that he can use technique with compactness and precision. Other films, no less daring in their narrative energies, can seem overblown and unfocused stylistically. Even granting all that I find intriguing in them, their dialogue scenes often seem uninspired at the shot to shot level, with unnecessary arcing tracking shots and slow push ins. Most directors would avoid cuts that are as disjointed as these from *Inception* (Figs. C.1 to C.2) and *Dunkirk* (Figs. C.3 to C.6).

Figs. C.1 to C.2

Correspondingly, Nolan's action scenes are sometimes clunky and casual in their composition and cutting. The films are often better at mind games than spatially precise physical activity. Some dialogue could be pruned too. (*What are you doing here? He loved you in his own way.* An event happens...*as we speak.*) At times the whole thing can seem overthought. As Chapter 4 hints, *Inception* might be complicated rather than complex. Instead of a coherent and organic cluster of principles, we might have a shiny contraption that just bolts on new premises as it hurtles along. And the rule sets sometimes falter. As we've seen, and as the second Appendix considers in more detail, perhaps the one week timeline of *Dunkirk* isn't handled consistently.

I haven't even posed the interpretive problems that Nolan's films raise. In *Inception*, for instance, we get a strange scenario. Find a sympathetic young woman to exorcise the demonic wife you can't quite abandon. Find a new father figure

Figs. C.3 to C.6

(Japanese mogul) to replace the old one (Brit architect). Use the spinning top to exemplify change and stability, childhood and maturity, as well as the unending turns of narrative.

Still, I persist in thinking that Nolan has added to our repertoire of narrative possibilities. His twin achievements in subjectivity and nonlinear narrative are nicely captured in the logo for his company Syncopy (Fig. C.7). The name, we're told, is derived from the word *syncope*, which refers to dizzying loss of consciousness. In the logo on screen, the word emerges from a black and white labyrinth. The letters hook into the paths and walls, making manifest that "labyrinth of linkages" that Tolstoy believed to be the essence of art. It's a good emblem for Nolan's plots, which crease layered timelines into one zigzag trajectory.

Nolan's formal project can be boiled down to that particular play with timelines. Three early films explored in how crosscutting could alter chronology gapped (*Following*), reverse (*Memento*), or embedded (*The Prestige*). Three later ones explored how crosscutting could juxtapose different time scales, creating a pile up of climaxes through embedding (*Inception*), alternation and circularity (*Interstellar*), and a simultaneity created wholly through cinematic means (*Dunkirk*). All these experiments had, as we've seen, consequences for exposition, subjectivity, and manipulations of viewpoint. No other filmmaker in Hollywood, as far as I know, has tried so determinedly to probe a set of constructive principles in such a rigorous way.

By enriching mainstream storytelling, Nolan has made many viewers aware of alternatives to the more familiar schemes. Whatever their intrinsic virtues and limitations, his major films have a sort of pedagogical value. Cast in the terms of popular genres, they reach wide audiences, and they may make those audiences more receptive to narrative innovations. Like *Pulp Fiction* and *The Matrix*, they wear their originality on their sleeve, and they can open viewers up to new experiences. When I study them, I can't help but admire them. I agree with Nolan's remark I quoted at the opening of the Introduction: "You want to go see a film that surprises you in some way.... I give a film a lot of credit for trying to do something fresh even if it doesn't work."

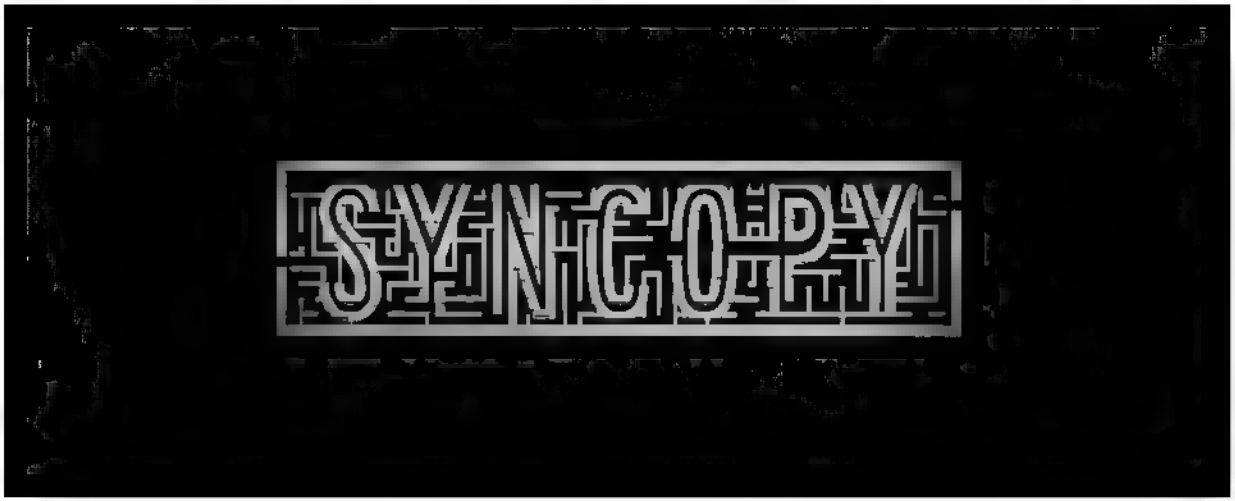


Fig. C.7

In taking this line of defense, I'm aware that someone might retort that the innovations are too cautious. Nolan not only motivates his formal experiments, he overmotivates them. Poor Leonard, telling everyone he meets about his memory deficit, is also telling *us* again and again, while the continuous exposition of *Inception* would seem to apologize too much. *Interstellar* relies on conventional science fiction paradoxes, and *The Prestige* steadies us by appeal to two traditional frames: a trial and discovered manuscripts. *Dunkirk* is less redundant in announcing its formal strategy, but apparently many viewers don't notice the temporal disparities and simply accept everything as happening more or less at once. By contrast, films like Resnais's *La Guerre est finie* and Ruiz's *Mysteries of Lisbon* play boldly with subjectivity, crosscutting, and embedded stories. And they don't need to keep spelling out and providing alibis for their formal strategies. In these films, it takes a while for us to figure out the shape of the game we're playing, and sometimes we just can't.

With Nolan we seem to be on the ground identified by Dwight Macdonald long ago as Midcult: that form of vulgarized modernism that makes formal experiment too easy for the audience. One of Macdonald's examples is *Our Town*, a folksy, ingratiating dilution of Asian and Brechtian dramaturgy. Nolan's narrative tricks, some might say, take only one step beyond what is normal in commercial cinema, and you can quickly get comfortable with them. To put it unkindly, we might say that this is storytelling for Humanities majors.

Much as I respect Macdonald, I think that not all artistic experiments need to be forbidding. There's "light modernism" too: Satie and Prokofiev as well as Schoenberg, Marianne Moore as well as T. S. Eliot, Borges as well as Joyce. Approached from the Masscult side, comic strips have given us *Krazy Kat* and *Polly and Her Pals* and Chris Ware and *Uncle Scrooge* (discussed in the Appendix). The "middlebrow modernism" criticized by Macdonald sometimes does revitalize conventional forms by making unusual techniques comprehensible. Earlier in the book I compared Nolan to J. B. Priestley and Alan Ayckbourne, two dramatists who did that. We might treat Nolan as an English filmmaker, steeped in the literature and drama of his country, who shares that sort of experimental impulse. In any case, Nolan's work remains stimulating on its own terms. It also joins a tradition, not finished yet, of showing that the bounds of popular art are remarkably flexible, and imaginative creators can find new ways to stretch them. ∞

References and Further Reading

Thanks to Edward Branigan, Guillaume Campreau-Dupras, Andrea Comisky, Evan Davis, Ethan de Seife, Jim Healy, Jonah Horwitz, Jim Kreul, Jason Mittell, Tim Palmer, Leo Rubinkowski, Sean Weitner, and David Wigram for comments on the original blog entries. Talks with editing expert Kait Fyfe have illuminated Nolan's work and more, while Hank Luttrell and Richard and Perri West informed me about science-fiction conventions relevant to *Interstellar*. Special thanks to Jeff Smith and of course Kristin, both of whom gave detailed comments on this revised edition.

The epigraph comes from Tolstoy's letter of 23–26 April 1876 to N. N. Strakhov. The translation is by Barbara Lönnqvist in her chapter, "*Anna Karenina*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy*, ed. Donna Tussing Orwin (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 81–82.

Introduction: How to Innovate

The epigraph for this chapter comes from Christopher Nolan and Jonathan Nolan, "Preface: Dreaming/Creating/Perceiving/Filmmaking," in *Inception: The Shooting Script* (San Rafael, CA: Insight, 2010), 18. The remark about "throwing a lot of things against the wall" is in "Christopher Nolan: 'Dark Knight Rises' Isn't Political," *Rolling Stone* (20 July 2012).

Box-office figures for Nolan's films are compiled from *Box Office Mojo*.

Umberto Eco's 1972 essay, "The Myth of Superman," appears in his book, *The Role of the Reader*. Portions are available here. One relevant passage is this: "He is busy by preference, not against black-market drugs nor, obviously, against corrupt administrators or politicians, but against bank and mail-truck robbers. In other words, *the only visible form that evil assumes is an attempt on private property*" (p. 123; italics in original).

For a more elaborated argument against the idea that films reflect a social mood or zeitgeist, see my essay, "Poetics of Cinema," in the book of the same name (Routledge, 2008), 30–32.

Chapter One: Style without Style

For detailed critiques of Nolan's style, see Jim Emerson's entries archived here; Jim's video essay dissecting one *Dark Knight* action scene is here. A. D. Jameson's essays on *Inception* are here and here. His essay on *The Dark Knight Rises* is here.

Nolan discusses the background to *Insomnia* in John Pavlus, "Sleepless in Alaska," *American Cinematographer* 83, 5 (May 2002), 34–45. My quotation about subjectivity comes from pp. 35–36.

I explore "intensified continuity" as a contemporary style in *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*, Part Two (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

On Eisenstein's ideas of building stylistic patterns at several levels, see my *Cinema of Eisenstein*, 139–162. Raymond Bellour's collection of essays *The Analysis of Film* includes pioneering studies of how fine-grained such patterns can become.

Chapter Two: Storytelling as a Formal Project

I lay out some principles governing the New Narrative Artifice in *The Way Hollywood Tells It* and in the essays "Film Futures" and "Mutual Friends and Chronologies of Chance" in *Poetics of Cinema*. For other discussions, see Allan Cameron, *Modular Narratives in Contemporary Cinema* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Warren Buckland, ed., *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Eva Laass, *Broken Taboos, Subjective Truths:*

Forms and Functions of Unreliable Narration in Contemporary American Cinema (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher, 2008); and Cornelia Klecker's "Mind-Tricking Narratives: Between Classical and Art-Cinema Narration" in *Poetics Today* 34, 1–2 (Spring-Summer 2013), 119–146.

The four-part plot pattern is explained in Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 22–44,and Bordwell, "Three Dimensions of Film Narrative," in Poetics of Cinema (New York: Routledge, 2008), 102–109. Online, search the blog entries at davidbordwell.net/blog and see "Anatomy of the Action Picture."

Nolan records his admiration for Ridley Scott's films and explains his diagramming habits in Gordon Cox, "Christopher Nolan Says His Filmmaking Process a 'Combination of Intuition and Geometry,'" *Variety* (20 April 2015). His discussion of genre work in the *Dark Knight* trilogy comes in Ramin Setoodah, "Christopher Nolan: Villains Defined the Dark Knight Trilogy More Than *Batman*," *Variety* (12 May 2018). Other quotations from Nolan are taken from Jeff Goldsmith, "The Architect of Dreams," *Creative Screenwriting* (July/August 2010), 18–26 (available, sort of, here). Nolan confesses his fondness for crosscutting in the voice-over commentary on the *Insomnia* DVD, at about 1:40. At 11:45 he remarks that it is "very much a film about one character's mind."

The best discussion of narrative embedding I know remains that of Viktor Shklovsky, in chapters 3–5 in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Dalkey Archive Press, 1990).

An expanded discussion of *Memento*, especially its four-part structure, is in my *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, 78–80. J. J. Murphy provides a detailed analysis of the film in his book *Me and You and Memento and Fargo: How Independent Screenplays Work*. Extensive backround on the film can be found in James Mottram, *The Making of Memento* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

Chapter Three: Are You Watching Closely?

For Christopher Priest's reflections on the film version of his novel, see *The Magic: The Story of a Film* and our blog entry here.

The remarks about structure come from the Introduction to Jonathan Noland and Christopher Nolan, *The Prestige: Screenplay* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), vii.

On the various formal options available in flashback construction, see *Reinventing Hollywood: How 1940s Filmmakers Changed Movie Storytelling* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), Chapter 2. See also our blog entry "Grandmaster Flashback."

Chapter Four: Dream a Little Dream within a Dream with Me

The manual referred to at the start of the chapter is Linda Aronson's 2010 book *The 21st Century Screenplay*. While we could quarrel with the labels Aronson applies, there's little doubt about the range of creative options she surveys.

Quotations from Nolan are taken from Jeff Goldsmith, "The Architect of Dreams," *Creative Screenwriting* (July/August 2010), 18–26 (available, sort of, here); and Christopher Nolan and Jonathan Nolan, "Preface: Dreaming/Creating/Perceiving/Filmmaking," in *Inception: The Shooting Script* (San Rafael, CA: Insight, 2010), 15.

On the concept of the "dominant" in a work of art, see Igor Chernov, "A Contextual Glossary of Formalist Terminology," trans. Ann Shukman and L. M. O'Toole, in *Russian Poetics in Translation* 4 (1977), 20. The idea is applied to film in Kristin Thompson, *Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis* (Princeton University Press, 1981), 34–37.

Despite his dislike of *Inception*, Jim Emerson has assembled a wide-ranging and long-running dossier on it, with many comments. Scroll down the several entries here. Elsewhere David Cairns makes the necessary Anthony Mann comparison. The Wikipedia entry on the film is information-packed, and it includes several helpful links.

Two websites diagram *Inception*'s embedded-dream device: here and here. And *Scientific American* weighs in on lucid dreaming here.

On the questions around rescuing Saito from Limbo, there's a wide-ranging discussion at Science Fiction & Fantasy.

On fourth-and fifth-level mind-reading, see Robin Dunbar, *The Human Story: A New History of Mankind's Evolution* (London: Faber, 2004), pp. 45–52. Dunbar's study found evidence suggesting that women are better at tracking recursive mental states than men are.

Some friends have suggested that videogames having affinities with *Inception* include *Assassin's Creed II*, *Miegakure*, and *Shadow of Destiny*. See also Kirk Hamilton's "Inception's Usability Problem."

Chapter Five: Pathos and the Puzzle Box

The opening quotation about *Inception*'s "emotional concepts" comes from Robert Capps, "Q & A: Christopher Nolan on Dreams, Architecture, and Ambiguity," *Wired*. The comments about a "people-based methodology" are in the Special Features Blu-ray of *Interstellar*, Chapter One, at about 7:00.

The brothers discuss actors and dead women in Christopher Nolan and Jonathan Nolan, "Preface: Dreaming/Creating/Perceiving/Filmmaking," *Inception: The Shooting Script* (San Rafael, CA: Insight, 2010), 11, 13.

The J. B. Priestley book whose title is out of frame in the opening shot is *Literature and Western Man* (New York: Harper, 1960).

Paradigm scenarios as ways of recognizing and responding to emotions were first proposed by Ronald de Sousa in *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 182-203. His ideas are applied to film in Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 80–91.

Murph's bookshelf has created a flurry of Internet speculation. Nolan himself has identified several personal associations. Among the most unexpected is one from an author who found her book there, but had no clue why. Me neither, except the title, *Out of the Blue*, suggests something coming from the sky.

In *The Science of Interstellar* (New York: Norton, 2014), 59, Kip Thorne reports that Nolan insisted on the time disparity on Miller's planet. Thorne explains the gravitational anomalies that allow Cooper to communicate with Murph on pp. 202–211, 262–272.

For a discussion of many of the time-travel paradoxes involved in *Interstellar*, see David Kyle Johson's "Interstellar, Causal Loops, and Saving Humanity."

Chapter Six: The Art Film as Event Movie

James Naremore's discussion of Kubrick as an artist of the grotesque is developed in *On Kubrick* (London: British Film Institute, 2007).

Nolan's remark about avoiding the conventions of the war film are taken from Christopher Nolan, *Dunkirk: The Complete Screenplay* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017), xix–xx. He discusses catching lines of action at different points on p. xxii. This conversation also considers the reasons Nolan omitted GHQ scenes (mentioning *A Bridge Too Far*) and adds comments about Hitchcock, early sound filming (some mistakes here), and *The Thin Red Line* ("maybe the best film ever made," xiii). The screenplay is fairly close to the finished film until the climactic bombing of the minesweeper; at that point, the onscreen editing doesn't completely match what's on the page. The remarks about the entire time structure not being apparent to everyone come from James Mottram, *The Making of Dunkirk* (San Rafael, CA: Insight, 2017), 125.

Even though the film is in Nolan's sense "all climax," it also falls quite nicely into our four-part structure. I think the midpoint comes when Tommy and his mates head to the blue trawler, starting a typical Development section.

For more on block construction, especially in the work of Tarantino, see this blog entry.

Is the name of Dawson's boat, the *Moonstone*, an homage to Wilkie Collins' 1868 mystery novel? Collins tells the story through different character viewpoints and skips back and forth in time, using replays that gradually explain what's going on.

Conclusion: Midcult Auteur?

Dwight Macdonald's 1960 essay is available in *Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain*. A PDF is online here. Macdonald seems to have relaxed his demands a bit in later years. He praised *8½*, softcore modernism for sure, as Shakespearean in its vivacity. "The general structure—a montage of tenses, a mosaic of time blocks—recalls *Intolerance*, *Kane*, and *Marienbad*, but in Fellini's hands it becomes light, fluid, evanescent. And delightfully obvious." The essay is reprinted in *Dwight Macdonald on Movies*, pp. 15–31.

I consider the achievements of "middlebrow modernism" in another period in *Reinventing Hollywood: How 1940s Filmmakers Changed Movie Storytelling*. ∞

Appendix

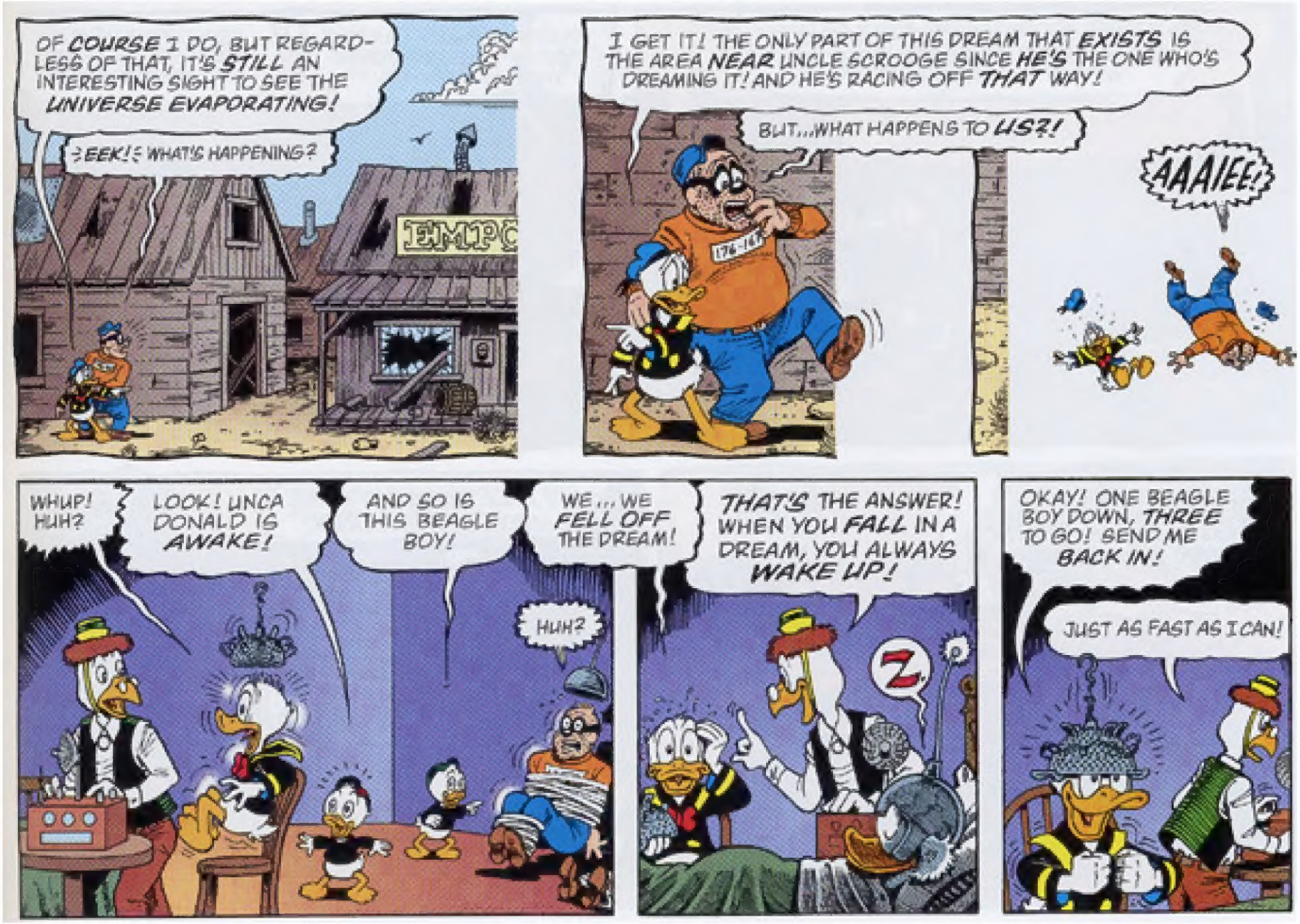
Based on Uncle Scrooge? That's Rich!

There has been much suggestion on the Internet, sometimes in jest, sometimes in earnest, sometimes half in jest and half in earnest, that Nolan got the idea for *Inception* from an Uncle Scrooge comic story with a shared-dream premise, "The Dream of a Lifetime!" Nearly all postings on this subject date this comic, created by Don Rosa, to 2002. Yes, "Dream" first appeared in 2002 in Danish. It came out in the U.S. in the May, 2004 issue of *Uncle Scrooge* (Gemstone #329). In 2006, it was reprinted in Rosa's book, *The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck Companion*. This volume includes Rosa's informative afterword, "The Making of 'The Dream of a Lifetime!'" which is not in the comic-book versions.

A download of "The Dream of a Lifetime" is available online, but it is missing a page, so I'm not linking it here. The *Companion* volume is out of print but can still be purchased here. "The Dream of a Lifetime" is included in the tenth and final volume of a series reprinting all of Rosa's duck stories chronologically by their original appearance. The "Behind the Scenes" section at the back leads off with a revised version of "The Making of 'The Dream of a Lifetime!'" Here Rosa mentions the theory that *Inception* was based on his comic tale. He saw the film only after reading about this on the internet and being skeptical of fans' claims. His comment upon seeing the film is "And...whoa...I was no longer so dismissive of those internet theorists. There are *so many* elements in *Inception* that match aspects of my story *very closely*! Ah well no matter." (p. 175).

If Nolan got the idea from the Rosa tale, which seems unlikely, he certainly changed it considerably. In fact, the differences are more significant than the similarities. First, the similarities:

- In "The Dream of a Lifetime!" several people enter the dream by being hooked up to a machine. Here it's a radio-controlled device invented by Gyro Gearloose, who intended for it "to help psychiatrists examine the dreams of their patients." (Gearloose was created in 1952 by Carl Barks to provide whatever wacky invention his plots required.) The receivers are metal colanders wired as antennae and worn on the heads of the people sharing the dream.
- Waking up from visiting the dream is triggered by falling (see below).
- Characters in reality can attempt to insert objects or situations into the dream by making sounds or presenting objects for Scrooge to smell, though this usually goes comically wrong. This somewhat resembles the premise that the jolts of the van in the first dream level of *Inception* cause earthquake-like rumbles in the second level and so on.
- The characters frequently explain to each other how the shared-dream technology works. Rosa makes this humorous in part by starting the story with Scrooge dreaming and the Beagle Boys arriving in his money bin with the Gearloose equipment, which they have already stolen. Rosa then makes the exposition deliberately clunky and obvious. One of the stupider Beagles asks, "Sure...uh...tell me again how it works?" There are then several panels of explanation as the group arranges the equipment to enter the dream. As they are about ready, one remarks, "But I'll explain later" how they will get Scrooge to tell them the combination to his vault.
- All of the characters who enter Scrooge's mind are aware that they are in a dream, as is Scrooge, who has had each of these dreams many times.


OF COURSE I DO, BUT REGARDLESS OF THAT, IT'S STILL AN INTERESTING SIGHT TO SEE THE UNIVERSE EVAPORATING!
EEK! WHAT'S HAPPENING?
I GET IT! THE ONLY PART OF THIS DREAM THAT EXISTS IS THE AREA NEAR UNCLE SCROOGE SINCE HE'S THE ONE WHO'S DREAMING IT! AND HE'S RACING OFF THAT WAY!
BUT...WHAT HAPPENS TO US?!
AAAIEE!
WHUP! HUH?
LOOK! UNCA DONALD IS AWAKE!
AND SO IS THIS BEAGLE BOY!
WE... WE FELL OFF THE DREAM!
HUH?
THAT'S THE ANSWER! WHEN YOU FALL IN A DREAM, YOU ALWAYS WAKE UP!
Z
OKAY! ONE BEAGLE BOY DOWN, THREE TO GO! SEND ME BACK IN!
JUST AS FAST AS I CAN!

Now the differences:

- There is a single dreamer throughout, and Scrooge remains in his own bed.
- There is only one level of dreaming, and Donald, who enters the dream to foil the Beagle Boys, returns at intervals to the bedroom to report progress and plan strategies.
- Spatially, the dream extends only a short distance around Scrooge. If the characters move too far from him, it fades out, which Rosa represents by having portions of the panels go white. The Beagle Boys exit the dream, one by one, by falling into the white void (see image on next page).
- Scrooge's dreams are essentially flashbacks, though their events are altered by the other characters who enter the dreams. The plot passes through a series of seven recurring dreams, all based on real adventures Scrooge has had in the distant past. Each of the seven dreams derives from situations in Rosa's *The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck* series. (The one-volume edition of this series is out of print, but it still is available in a two-volume version, here and here.) These dreams take place out of chronological order, and Scrooge's age changes with each new dream. The stories are "The Vigilante of Pizen Bluff," #6, Scrooge age 23; "The Dreamtime Duck of the Never Never," #7, age 29; "The Master of the Mississippi," #2, age 15; "The Empire Builder from Calisota," #11, age 45; "The Buckaroo of the Badlands," #3, age 15; "The Last of the Clan McDuck," #1, age 10; and "Hearts of the Yukon," #8C, age 31.
- The rules are relatively simple. Crucially, Scrooge may be any age within the current story, but he, being the main dreamer, recognizes Donald and the Beagle Boys.
- "Dream" is designed to be funny, as when the Beagle Boys keep complaining that they're in a nightmare, while Scrooge thinks of them as pleasant dreams. This is normal life to such an adventurous character.

It should be clear that the intricacy of Rosa's story originates not from the shared-dream structure, which is fairly straightforward. Rosa is more interested in finding a way to rework some of the scenes from his earlier biographical Scrooge comics. The whole *Life and Times* project originated from Rosa's working method of teasing out minutiae about Scrooge from the original Carl Barks stories and then concocting sequels or prequels to them. *Life and Times* is an attempt to use all the mentions of past events, relatives, locales, and dates to devise a biography of Scrooge. "Dream of a Lifetime!" simply carries that *modus operandi* one step further.

The other big difference between "Dream" and *Inception* is that a reader who was not familiar with the seven earlier stories would miss much of what goes on in "Dream." It was written for McDuck aficionados as a game of recognition. For those who do recognize the seven situations referenced, "Dream" is quite easy to follow. For those who don't, it must seem complicated and mysterious, most crucially since the readers won't recognize Glittering Goldie, Scrooge's lost love, in the opening "private" part of the dream.

In contrast, *Inception* is self-contained and tries for a very different game of comprehension with the viewer, one that would not be much aided by knowledge from other Nolan films.

"Dream" is also recognizable to fans as one of the trick stories that Rosa has written occasionally. These are not linked to Barks's stories but develop some simple premise that allows Rosa to play with time and space in virtuoso fashion. These include "Cash Flow," where the Beagle Boys buy an anti-friction ray-gun (*Uncle Scrooge*, Gladstone #224); "The Beagle Boys vs. the Money Bin," (*Uncle Scrooge*, Gemstone #325), where the Beagle Boys find a map of the money bin; and my favorite, "A Matter of Some Gravity" (*Walt Disney's Comics*, Gladstone, #610), where Magica de Spell buys a wand that turns gravity sideways for Scrooge and Donald.

In short, if Nolan ever saw "The Dream of a Lifetime!," it could only have given him a few ideas out of the many that went into *Inception*. ∞

Further Notes on *Dunkirk*: Times and Timing

Dunkirk, sans credits, runs a little more than 99 minutes and consists of around 99 sequences. It's very fragmentary. But then, so is a lot of war fiction. *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928) consists of many fairly short scenes. Evelyn Scott's vast novel *The Wave* (1929) surveys the U.S. Civil War through over a hundred vignettes of the home front and the battlefront, involving characters mostly unaware of each other. William March's *Company K* (1933) consists of 113 short segments, each bearing the name of one soldier and told in first-person by him (even if he dies in the course of the episode). Unlike what happens in *The Wave*, the men are mostly known to one another, and some actions are replayed through different viewpoints. A fancier sort of fragmentation goes on in Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), which interrupts its scenes with flashbacks ("The Time Machine") and sections called "Chorus."

The war novel I've seen that's closest to what Nolan gives us is Peter Bowman's *Beach Red* (1946). The story tells of a US effort to capture a Japanese-held island. Bowman wanted, he explained to achieve "a sincere representation of a composite American soldier living from second to second and minute to minute because that is all he can be sure of." This heightened sensitivity to duration led Bowman to try an unusual strategy.

His novel is in blank verse, in stanzas of varying length but all conforming to a strict pattern. Each line is equal to one second of story time. Each chapter consists of sixty lines, or one minute of story time. And the book has sixty chapters, representing the hour in which the forces take the beachhead. Like Nolan, Bowman wants a deep, visceral subjectivity, and he aims at this through a frankly mechanical layout of his text. The rigid pattern seeks to force the reader to sink into time. Bowman explains:

> I have tried to create a mood of inexorable regularity that would correspond to the subtle tyranny of the military timetable.... I have attempted to do for the eye what the ticking of a clock accomplishes for the ear...the relentless inflexibility of time itself.

The aching inching forward of time is stressed thematically too, which includes reflections like "Would there be armies if clocks had never been invented?" The book ends with a second-person narrator ("You") dying. Soldier Whitney reports: "There is nothing moving but his watch." Like Bowman, Nolan is interested in both the psychology of time and the problem of representing it in his artistic medium.

On the tendency of war novels to play with time, it's worth mentioning that *Catch-22* may exemplify one weird possibility. The Yossarian plotline slips between past and present very fluidly, with some sentences containing several jumps to and fro. The Milo Minderbinder plot is linear, tracing Milo's building of his empire in 1-2-3 order. But Milo's progress appears at different moments in past and present in the Yossarian strand, so some critics have argued that the novel has a deliberately impossible time scheme. See Jan Solomon, "The Structure of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*" (1967) and, for rebuttal, Doug Gaukroger, "Time Structure in *Catch-22*" (1970). Even if *Catch-22* doesn't actually do this, it remains a creative option that someone should try. Mr. Nolan?

Which raises the question: Is *Dunkirk* completely rigorous in its time-tripping? The chapter points out that we see only two complete days in the Mole section, with episodic beach shots suggesting the passage of an unspecified stretch of time. If those shots do form a sort of pivot or hinge, it implies that the two days we witness are Tommy's first day and last day on the beach, fulfilling the title's announcement of "one week." The time gap is reinforced by the Shivering Soldier's battle fatigue, resulting from his being in the hold of a torpedoed rescue ship. He's introduced early in the Sea thread, already a trembling wreck. But

we see him later in the film (though in an earlier night) commandeering a rowboat when he calmly urges Tommy and Alex to stay in the water until he can summon more help. Presumably a ship that carried him was torpedoed after that first night. That situation implies that at least one day and night has passed between Tommy's first day and his second.

But complicating this time scheme is Bolton's remark to Winnant at the start of the second day: "After yesterday's losses, it's one ship on the mole at a time." The losses he's likely referring to are the sinking of the hospital ship and the destroyer, the action we just saw. So are the scenes we're shown by attachment to Tommy comprising just two *consecutive* days? And are the seaside shots of the soldiers waiting not covering a long gap? Perhaps the opening title's reference to "one week" isn't indicating the length of time presented in the plot but rather the period when the troops were waiting on the beach, before Tommy arrived. Yet this two-day option doesn't seem to allow a night for the Shivering Soldier to have been torpedoed in a second boat. And it runs against comments made by Nolan and others that the film's Mole scenes consume a week. I don't know how to resolve the anomaly suggested by Bolton's remark. If there's a rule here, I missed it. ∞